

The Experience of (In)Accessibility at University:
What Disabled Graduate Students Reveal

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Abstract

Although the number of disabled students entering graduate school has increased in recent years, research pertaining to graduate students with disabilities remains underdeveloped. The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to better understand the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. The theoretical orientation was shaped by a social model of disability. The study was focused around the following major research question: What have been the experiences of (in)accessibility for three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario? Subquestions were organized around subcategories, such as (a) experiences related to accessibility, (b) experiences related to inaccessibility, and (c) insights related to future recommendations to enhance accessibility. The study found that (in)accessibility at university was related to (a) specific places on campus, (b) specific people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness. A variety of educational initiatives were recommended to foster accessible practices and to develop a more accepting and disability-friendly culture on campus. Based on these findings, the Trickle-down Effect Model was proposed as a means for promoting accessibility at university.

Areas of Interest

Accessibility, Inaccessibility, Disability, Disabled Graduate Students, Graduate Students with Disabilities, Graduate Studies (Master's, Doctoral, PhD), University, Disability Studies in Education.

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A Preliminary Word About Labelling

Before writing about disability as it pertains to the participants in this study, it is important to recognize that there has been considerable discussion about what constitutes appropriate labeling. In this section, I outline different schools of thought related to labeling practices to inform the reader about why certain labeling practices are used in this study.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) recommended that authors employ *person-first language* (p. 76) to reduce bias when referring to individuals who have particular disabilities. Under this approach, it is recommended that a disabled individual be referred to as an individual with a disability. Under traditional schools of thought, the latter is said to recognize the importance of the person-first whereas the former reportedly focuses predominantly on disability in a manner that can potentially objectify the individual (APA, 2010; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Syracuse University Disability Cultural Center [SUDCC], 2012). However, as SUDCC (2012) cautions, “being ‘politically correct’ does not make a term automatically inoffensive to a group of people” (para. 3).

Person-first labeling practices are typically challenged by the Disability Studies community and, as a result, disability-first language is often featured within the literature (see Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009) and disability rights discourses (Linton, 1998; Titchkosky, 2011). In essence, there has been reclamation of terminology (SUDCC, 2012; Linton, 1998). For example, Linton (1998) identified that “the disability community has attempted to wrest control of the language from the previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to

describe disability and disabled people” (p. 9). Furthermore, according to the SUDCC (2012), *disability-first language* (para. 5) is favored by certain cultural groups within the (North) American disability community.

Apprehension towards the use of person-first language exists for a few reasons. First, like Titchkosky (2011), SUDCC (2012) noted that “using person-first language . . . *makes the disability into something negative, which can and should be separated from the person*” (para. 5). Second, according to Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012), person-first language can “deny the importance of the social construction of disability” (p. 39) and “individualize sociostructural disablement” (p. 39). Third, given that person-first language is traditionally tied to the (mis)belief that disability is a problem or deficiency (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011), some have argued that person-first language represents a dominant discourse that perpetuates (false) notions of normalcy (see Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011). In particular, the placement of disability second to personhood is a hegemonic and normative act that devalues disability (Titchkosky, 2011). As a result, some scholars prefer to use *disabled person* or *disabled people*, first and foremost, to resist the dominant medicalized, individualized, and pathologies discourses around disability that can be oppressive (Linton, 1998). Furthermore, Sherry (2008) noted that the use of person-first language separates the person from his or her disability and this can, in turn, lead to a “disembodied conception of identity” (p. 13). SUDCC (2012) supported this notion, stating that certain members of the disability community often resist person-first language because “they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are” (para. 5).

Although disability-first language is popular within Disability Studies literature, person-first language is not necessarily abandoned (see Linton, 1998; Sherry, 2008). For example, Linton (1998) identified that “occasionally *people with disabilities* is used as a variant of *disabled people*” (p. 13). Furthermore, although Sherry (2008) favored the disability-first approach, he noted that he was uncomfortable relying entirely on one style because, in so doing, he cautioned that the use of the disability-first approach could also become dogmatic. Consequently, Sherry employed both forms of labeling within his work, but leaned towards the use of disability-first language. Based on these arguments, both styles of labeling will be used in this study.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is a generic qualitative study of the experience of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario . After having spent almost a decade of my adult life in university as a disabled student, I have learned that the academic journey can be unpredictable. Although I eventually found my place in a supportive academic community, I have also felt (de)valued in terms of my academic abilities, contributions, and overall presence, occasionally throughout this period. Sometimes feelings of devaluation were the result of contact with agents of the institution, and sometimes they evolved gradually as a result of personal and institutional failures. As an individual with an invisible disability, the negative moments I experienced left an impressionable mark that, at certain points, left me feeling marginalized on the basis of my disability.

My experiences as a disabled student have placed me on a rollercoaster ride throughout my educational life. Despite my impairments with the written word, memory, and processing speed, I persisted and at times excelled in school. But I also experienced my share of failure. For example, as I advanced through school, the struggles I experienced in elementary and secondary school increased incrementally. Despite my mother's repeated requests for official testing to support a diagnosis in elementary school, her requests went largely unanswered. After several years, I was only unofficially labeled as "in need" and I was periodically withdrawn from the classroom for remedial work. So without an official diagnosis, I became the difficult kid in class, not the kid with difficulties worthy of documentation. A common response was that if I only tried harder,

I was likely to do better. So this became the guiding logic behind my educational life—try harder, do better. The end result was an almost visceral feeling of disapproval because I was different and difficult.

As I began dedicating increasing amounts of time towards improving academically—much to the detriment of my (non)life outside school—concerns about my difficulties faded from the consciousness of my teachers. As a highly motivated student, I learned how to overcompensate for my (subsequently diagnosed) disability. As a result, my difficulties often went unnoticed. My experience parallels what Linton (1998) has referred to as *overcoming* (p. 17), in which “sheer strength or willpower has brought the person to the point where the disability is no longer a hindrance” (p. 17). Under these circumstances, Linton noted that, often “the person has risen above society’s expectation for someone with those characteristics” (p. 17). So I became skilled at pretending to be something other than myself. Teachers started to reward me for being the “most improved” student and, eventually, I reached the top of the honor roll. Through great amounts of unnoticed work, my invisible disability had become invisible to most outside observers. However, although I still appeared odd to some, I was not odd enough to warrant a label because of how I managed to defy the odds and achieve academic success.

In the wake of overcoming my disability, time passed and so did I; at least that was the case until I ventured off to university. While I never actually failed a university course, I experienced a range of failures that culminated in me voluntarily dropping out of university. I essentially succumbed to the pressures of academe. When I first attended university, I continued applying the same principle—try harder, do better—to appear as a

good student and overcome my difficulties. But after I transitioned from high school to university, it became even more daunting to keep pace with the academic demands that increased significantly. So the marathon to outrun my disability played out repeatedly, as if I was an academic athlete on a never-ending scholastic treadmill. It seemed like I was always pushing myself to keep pace without actually moving forward.

Amidst this struggle to literally stay on course, I adamantly opposed the resurgence of my mother's suggestions to be tested for a disability despite recognizing that I was different in terms of my academic needs. My attempts to blend in by appearing as "normal" as possible is what Linton (1998) describes as *passing* (pp. 19-22). This relates to disability, in particular, when people are "able to conceal their impairment or confine their activities to those that do not reveal their disability" (p. 19). Passing is often diverse, complex, and multifaceted, such that, it:

May be a deliberate effort to avoid discrimination or ostracism, or it may be an almost unconscious, Herculean effort to deny oneself the reality of one's racial history, sexual feelings, or bodily state. The attempt may be a deliberate act to protect oneself from the loathing of society or may be an unchecked impulse spurred by an internalized self-loathing. It is likely that often the reasons entail an admixture of any of these various parts. (pp. 19-20)

Although I did not know at the time that I was passing, I knew that I did not want to be treated differently, even if being treated differently would have enabled me to cope with the demands of the university environment. Consequently, I separated my public self from my private self—the place where I shored up my disability—because I feared my

disability would negatively influence how others thought of and treated me. My past had led me to believe that if others knew I was disabled or different, then they would think of me as difficult, and distance themselves accordingly. But in retrospect, through this denial of self, another gap emerged between others and me. By not openly acknowledging having a disability, outside observers often could not understand why my problems were “special.” This matter was confounded further because I lacked a legitimizing label and an official diagnosis to rationalize my differences and my difficulties. Oddly enough, obtaining a label was contingent on a desire to self-disclose.

Nevertheless, the fear of admitting my differences meant that I did not obtain formal documentation that would have granted me access to accommodations; accommodations that would likely have prevented me from withdrawing from my first attempt at obtaining a university degree. Despite dropping out in my second year, my initial year of study was successful because I was able to make my own accommodations. Thanks to extra credits I received for advanced high school courses, I was able to create a reduced course-load in my first year. However, when this self-made accommodation was not possible in my second year, a lack of time caught up with me and I could no longer (over)compensate for the timely demands of the academic environment. As a result, once I exhausted my reserve of extra credit, I exhausted myself. As a cost of my inability to keep up—both with respect to pace and appearances—I felt pressured to withdraw from my studies. There is an ideal way to be a good student, and good standing is often contingent on taking a set number of courses over a (“full”) period of time. Consequently, keeping up and blending in has been a continual challenge throughout my time in university as an undergraduate and a graduate student.

An underlying theme of my educational experiences has been how much extra work it took me to appear normal. The price I paid for being a good student came at the cost of feeling socially isolated, mentally exhausted, and physically broken. I experienced three critical incidents—one for each degree I completed—when I no longer had the mental and physical energy to complete the work required of me: the readings, the papers, the projects, the presentations. With all of this stress, my body broke down after my first year of graduate studies. All the stress associated with trying to overcompensate brought about a new layer of medical complications. In the end, the costs I paid for denying my disability were great. As Linton (1998) has described, “both passing and overcoming take their toll. The loss of community, the anxiety, and the self-doubt that inevitably accompany this ambiguous social position and the ambivalent personal state are the enormous cost of declaring disability unacceptable” (p. 21).

In relation to the social costs of disclosure, my initial fear of being stigmatized was confirmed when I finally obtained a formal diagnosis after dropping out after the second year of my undergraduate studies. When I returned to university the second time around, I headed off to a new university with a new approach in mind. I decided to support my academic endeavors by seeking assistance from the university. For this to occur, I had to undergo testing and be formally labeled by a professional. However, due to a delay in receiving my official diagnosis, I deferred disclosing my disability and making accommodation requests until I was able to present the appropriate paperwork to support my requests. But some things remained the same. As I waited for documentation, my time was easily filled with my efforts to be as so-called normal a student as possible. Part of this routine entailed eagerly participating in class discussions, and I was called

upon frequently to participate—at least until I disclosed my disability. Once I engaged in the formal process of identifying myself as disabled, the demeanor of one professor immediately changed towards me. Not only was I no longer invited to participate, but I was blatantly dismissed and ignored on several occasions. This dismissive behavior even carried over to individual relations. For example, although other peers were given plenty of time for one-on-one questions, constructive feedback, and personal pleasantries, I was often made to wait (or be ignored) only to be told after several minutes it was no longer a “good time” to seek assistance. Although this instructor subtly began treating me differently, I was *capable* of reading into the series of implicit messages that indicated I had become less worthy as a student. Needless to say, I eventually stopped participating in that class (which was ironically a children’s psychology course encompassing discussions about a range of disabilities) and no longer chose to interact with that professor.

Although one professor may have limited my participation in class because of my disability, I experienced another professor who denied the existence of my disability itself. Near the end of my undergraduate degree, I met with a professor to discuss working on a potential project. Although the meeting was intended to focus on the potential project, I became the subject matter because the professor would not accept that I was disabled. On the sole basis of a 15-minute conversation, the professor referenced my ability to be articulate and noted my past accomplishments as evidence that I could not be disabled. Instead the professor, armed with professional expertise, concluded that I likely *only* had *some* anxiety issues. While I did not always disclose my disability for fear of being judged, I paradoxically felt just as threatened by someone taking this label from

me—particularly in the university environment where such labels are essential to securing accommodations that were vital to my continued success. Furthermore, through such actions, [s]he trivialized my disability further because [s]he merely applied another label to define my difference, which served [her/his] benefits, but not mine.

I was initially taken aback and I grew increasingly agitated upon reflection about our exchange. The invisibility of my disability was made clear; this person had not observed the hours I required to complete my work, [s]he did not recognize that I had no life outside school, and [s]he did not account for the costs I felt pressured to pay to remain a satisfactory—let alone successful—participant in university. In reality, I had no time for family, friends, fun, or sickness; I only had limited time for sleep, and I had to pair eating with other activities to free up time for studying. “Free time” and “spare time” seemed more figurative than literal, serving as an oxymoronic play on words rather than an actual call to play. So this professor, with a background in the field but not in my life, failed to consider how all work and no play naturally added to my stress. I did not doubt that I had an anxious personality; I doubted, however, the notion that anxiety was my only supposed problem. In my life, anxiety and disability were two sides of the same coin. My disability made me anxious and I was anxious about my disability. With only limited time in a day, I feared the consequences of not being able to manage my impairment given the demands of university life. In addition to this, I worried about how others would react to me if they knew I had a disability; a fear that materialized into reality through interactions such as this.

While the pain of these encounters stung, I was at least able to find alternative modes of support that prevented me from withdrawing from my subsequent studies at

university. The majority of my experiences with professors and disability support staff were positive and supportive. Although I generally received beneficial supports for disclosing my disability, disclosure did not always serve to prevent negative experiences from occurring. Furthermore, it also did not resolve my discomfort with being documented as different. However, after reading the work of Linton (1998) in one of my undergraduate courses, I gradually began to rethink whether or not being disabled was a negative thing. Subsequently, after becoming exposed to Disability Studies literature, I learned how being different could be used to show how the system, and not the circumstances of my natural way of being (disabled), could be viewed as potentially problematic (see Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Consequently, this literature sparked my interest in shedding light on experiences with (in)accessibility—that is, those which relate to accessibility and inaccessibility—in university based on the views of fellow graduate students with disabilities.

In retrospect, I had never really reflected on those moments in which I had felt included. Rather my thoughts tended to centre on moments of marginalization. As such, I was more aware of how I had been made to feel distressed, displaced, and devalued. Although this could be a limitation on my part, a similar but paradoxical sentiment often occurs within the nondisabled population where moments of inaccessibility and exclusion are frequently overlooked (Titchkosky, 2011)—as Michalko has claimed, “no one ‘normally’ thinks of ‘normalcy’” (as cited in Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009, p. 6). Although some of my academic struggles linger in my mind, I recognize that these experiences are highly personal and may not necessarily reflect the thoughts and

occurrences of prospective participants. This made me aware of the importance of not inhibiting participants from expressing their lived university experiences as graduate students with disabilities.

Background to the Problem: The Unexamined Experience of (In)Accessibility in Education

Many have been socialized to believe that inclusion is typical in the Canadian educational context. Barakett and Cleghorn (2000) noted that “we have all been socialized to believe that the system is fair and just” (p. 7). The authors identified that inclusion represents an enduring myth in education:

In Canadian and North American society in general, . . . it is widely believed that there is equality of educational opportunity (equal access to schooling, equal treatment within schools, and the potential for equal results). This is a popular but ill-defined concept, and more of a myth than a reality. (p. 6)

The concept of inclusion is problematic, according to Slee and Allan, because “we are *still* citing inclusion as our goal; *still* waiting to include, yet *speaking* as if we are already inclusive” (as cited in Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 81). For example, Graham and Slee (2008) have challenged assumptions about the inclusiveness of schools by noting that “to include is not necessarily to be inclusive” (p. 82). As a result, it is important to recognize that the presence of a disabled person is not the sole determinant of the degree to which an educational environment is inclusive—or by extension, accessible. As a result, Barton (2008) notes “inclusion is based on a recognition of the profoundly serious understanding of the nature of exclusion and discrimination, which involve the perennial task of

identifying, challenging, and ultimately removing all the complex, varied barriers to inclusive participation” (p. xviii). Therefore, by recognizing that inclusion can be a socially constructed myth, one can begin to recognize that schools are not necessarily as inclusive as one might believe. However the difficulty with this in university is that these problems often persist because the nondisabled typically fail to critically reflect on issues of access and, as a result, the idea of access can often appear as more of a future promise than a current reality (Titchkosky, 2011).

Background to the Problem: The Unexamined Experience of (In)Accessibility in University

Conversations about inclusive educational environments might evoke thoughts about accessibility within elementary and secondary school settings. However, just as important, but often less recognized, is the importance of accessibility with respect to higher education. Titchkosky (2011) identifies some limitations associated with inclusion in the university environment. For example, she notes that “the concept of inclusion is being widely used and treated as a self-evident good by contemporary Western(ized) universities. And yet, disabled people are so often, and in so many ways, excluded from significant participation” (pp. 95-96). With respect to the development and implementation of an accessibility policy in university, she noted that “disability policy end[s] up planning to do rather than doing, so that planning for inclusion becomes the doing” (p. 100). This in turn creates a conflict of values such that “while access and inclusion often seem like unquestioned values, it is also true that some people have to fight for access while others are shocked or even irritated by this fight” (p. ix). Therefore,

based on this research, accessibility is an important characteristic and concept to promote within university.

According to Titchkosky (2011), it remains essential to critically examine how disability and access are included and excluded within university and how this shapes understanding in social places, such as universities. From her conceptual analysis, she demonstrates that there is a lack of understanding about how some practices, policies, and environments that are presumed to be accessible, are not necessarily so. For example, she notes that while universities sometimes label certain spaces—such as washrooms—as accessible, the ways in which disability can present itself, and the standards for such provisions, can be overlooked. Furthermore, Titchkosky also argues that misperceptions about access can be perpetuated by visual cues in the environment, such as the accessibility symbol. However, certain disabled individuals are not always able to access spaces labeled “accessible.”

Statement of the Problem

According to Titchkosky (2011), disabled individuals at university are reportedly positioned as *half-and-half* (p. 19) because the inclusion of disability within the environment is “both half in and half out; half marginal and now also a part of the mainstream” (p. 19). Drawing on this notion, I agree that although graduate students with disabilities are *half in* because they are present at university, they remain *half out* given that their experiences have remained largely underrepresented within the literature (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin 2011; National Educational Association of Disabled Students [NEADS], 2014). Grundy and McGinn (2008) identify this research gap by noting that “the literature in disability education seldom addresses

graduate education” (para. 2), but also note that “graduate degree programs are obvious sites for such education” (para. 2). This underrepresentation of disabled graduate students in the literature necessitates further exploration of the experiences of (in)accessibility according to the perspectives of graduate students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to better understand the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. As a result, this study focused on access as it is (or is not) experienced at university. In keeping with the notion of using “difference that makes a difference” (Michalko, 2009, p. 414), this study values the contributions to knowledge that disability can provide regarding the experiences of (in)accessibility in university. Therefore, this study was also intended to generate understanding about (in)accessibility to foster more accessible practices in the future.

Titchkosky (2011) also notes issues can be revealed when access becomes a space of questioning. Through her critical exploration, Titchkosky used access as a space to question how disability is included and excluded within one Ontario university. As a result, the questions in my study centre on (in)accessibility. This study was guided by the following research question: What have been the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario? In order to address this main research question, I drew upon the following subquestions to obtain detailed information:

1. What key factors do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having enabled their access while studying at university?
2. What key factors do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having limited their access while studying at university?
3. What recommendations do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) make to enhance the experience of access at university?

Such questions were intended to deconstruct the climate in which (in)accessibility manifests, and provide insight into how accessibility can be improved in the future.

Rationale for the Study

Higher education has become increasingly important to individuals (including those with disabilities) wanting to pursue educational and career-related goals because the acquisition of social, economic, and cultural knowledge enables individuals and societies to remain competitive (Educational Policy Institute [EPI], 2008; Grundy & McGinn, 2008). According to Kim and Williams (2012), disabled students thought it was more important to pursue graduate studies rather than to enter the job market immediately upon completion of their undergraduate education. In turn, students with disabilities have been pursuing graduate studies at an increasing rate according to the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS, 2014)—an organization that has conducted a comprehensive pan-Canadian survey to explore the experiences of and obtain demographics about graduate students with disabilities (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014). However, while increasing research attention has been paid to the experiences of disability in higher education, Duffett and Latour (2015)—speaking as

representatives of NEADS—noted that there remains a gap in knowledge about disabled graduate students. NEADS (2014) reaffirmed this notion, indicating that:

As the number of students with disabilities entering graduate school continues to increase, disability service providers, graduate departments, and universities as a whole are having to develop new strategies to facilitate their success. Currently, there is a critical lack of research and information in this area, as little significant research on this population has been undertaken within Canada or the United States, and demographic data are significantly lacking. There is a considerable need to better understand the overall experiences of disabled students in graduate studies. (para. 1)

Therefore, given the vast amount of time graduate students have spent in academia, they can offer important, but overlooked perspectives about their experiences in university in general and in Canadian universities in particular. Furthermore, by sharing these insights, the graduate students may, in turn, foster insight as to how the university could be made into a more accessible space and a more inclusive system.

After designing my research questions, I learned West et al. (1993) and NEADS (2014) had used similar research questions. In particular, the quantitative study conducted by West et al. (1993) focused on (a) student satisfaction with services and accommodations, (b) “barriers, issues, and concerns” (p. 457) that faced disabled students, and (c) ways to improve the accessibility of services and educational environments. Although the research questions asked by West et al. and myself were similar, the studies were fundamentally different. For example, I conducted a single-site qualitative study in Ontario, Canada that focused exclusively on the experiences of

graduate students with disabilities whereas West et al. (1993) collected data from students with disabilities in a range of postsecondary institutions across Virginia, USA.

Furthermore, although my research questions had been devised prior to the release of information related to the study conducted by NEADS in 2012 (see NEADS, 2014), as a result of the extensive amount of time it has taken me to complete my project, I feel as though it is necessary for me to identify that NEADS also sought “to examine the experiences of, and barriers faced by, graduate students with disabilities across Canada” (NEADS, 2014, para. 3) and to identify recommendations that could enhance future experiences of graduate students. However, unlike my study, this was a pan-Canadian research project that was conducted using mixed-methods (see NEADS, 2014) and the specific topics covered within their instrument also varied slightly from my qualitative questions (see Appendix A). Although the studies were both intended to focus on the views of graduate students with disabilities, my qualitative study provides rich descriptions that are specific to one institution. By concentrating the research within one university, my study will offer a unique vantage point as to how (in)accessibility manifests within the institution that could potentially be overshadowed within a national, multi-institutional study.

According to Beer (2010), “society’s perceptions of disability are changing” (p. 4); however, despite a growing cultural rhetoric that claims to value the recognition of disability rights and the improvement of access standards for the disabled, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (n.d.) noted that over half of all the complaints received identified that discrimination was experienced as a result of having a disability. As a result of failed attempts to minimize marginalization of disabled persons, new

enforcement strategies have been implemented to augment the *Human Rights Code* [HRC] (Beer, 2010; Flaherty & Roussy, 2014). Although the *HRC* still stands as a fundamental piece of legislation recognizing the equality rights of people, including individuals with disabilities, the *HRC* has been augmented by additional legislation in the province of Ontario. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA, 2005) as well as its accompanying regulations (e.g., *O. Reg.* 191/11; *O. Reg.* 429/07) are aimed at mandating accessibility to ensure access for individuals with disabilities in the province of Ontario. As a result, the implementation of new governmental controls, such as the AODA (2005) legislation and its corresponding regulations (e.g., *O. Reg.* 191/11 and *O. Reg.* 429/07), delegate responsibility to service providers—such as universities—for demonstrating adherence to accessibility standards.

Despite these legislative changes, academics such as Flaherty and Roussy (2014) have used their academic posts to critically evaluate and challenge whether the AODA has brought about transformation in higher education (see also Titchkosky, 2011). Therefore despite the advancements made within disability law, the task of ensuring access for disabled Ontarians is not yet complete (Beer, 2010; Flaherty & Roussy, 2014)—particularly with respect to higher education (Flaherty & Roussy, 2014). Consequently, the growing focus on (in)accessibility in contemporary legislation reinforces the importance of this study, particularly because, “*access* not only needs to be sought out and fought for, legally secured, physically measured, and politically protected, it also *needs to be understood*” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 4; emphasis added).

Importance of the Study

In order to develop awareness about how accessibility and inaccessibility are experienced by graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s), it is important to recognize that “inaccessibility can only be perceived when access starts to become a question” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 62). By drawing attention to the often unacknowledged and unexamined experiences of graduate students with disabilities in university, insights may be gained that reveal how accessibility in university may be enhanced and limited. This is important because, without critical reflection, people may remain unaware of how inaccessibility can manifest within the university (see Titchkosky, 2011). Furthermore, “attending to what otherwise remains a taken-for-granted operation in university life is the beginning of cultivating a new, expanded version of disability” (p. xiii)—or in this case, (in)accessibility at the graduate level. Otherwise, if this phenomenon remains unexplored, the lack of critical action could result in the perpetuation of inaccessibility within the university.

Although the EPI (2008) notes that “research into the challenges facing people with disabilities in the postsecondary system is widely recognized as a necessity” (p. 5), issues related to graduate students with disabilities have received minimal attention and have remained largely unexplored in research (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin 2011; NEADS, 2014), particularly in relation to the nature of their experience (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Jacklin 2011; NEADS, 2014) and from a Canadian perspective (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014). As a result, research into the graduate student population remains to be cultivated. Therefore, my research is focused on a particular population in the higher educational environment—namely, graduate

students—because their views have not been readily sought in the existing body of literature and this appears to be particularly important in the Canadian higher educational landscape today.

Furthermore, although disability has been studied abundantly from a medicalized perspective, current research needs to embrace a socially-minded perspective that draws upon disability as a constructive device, which can foster critical reflection and collective action aimed at conditions within the social as opposed to the individual (see Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). The social-minded approach can, in turn, counter the reproduction of ideologies that devalue disability by positioning it as a tragic, individualized, deficit in need of cure or remediation. Although Disability Studies scholars, such as Linton (1998) and Titchkosky (2011), have been influential in critically examining and calling attention to how access and exclusion can manifest in the university environment, there remain gaps in the literature. Both authors provide analysis from the perspectives of disabled academics. As a result, there remains a need to explore issues of disability and (in)accessibility in the university environment from additional perspectives, such as disabled graduate students. This gap subsequently reinforces the need for this study. As such, this study will address the existing lack of awareness concerning the experiences self-identifying graduate students have with (in)accessibility in university and, through the practice of critical engagement, it may be possible to reveal how stakeholders can address issues of inaccessibility at a systematic rather than an individual level.

This study also explores the experience of (in)accessibility from my vantage point as a disabled graduate student seeking to engage with peers who self-identify as disabled

or as having a disability(s), to better understand the experience of (in)accessibility at university. As a result, this study is intended to be beneficial to future students with disabilities who pursue degrees in higher education because it may open up discourses that can foster more inclusive and accessible practices in university.

Theoretical Framework

This research is situated in a belief that the perspectives of the disabled will provide universities with useful knowledge of how (in)accessibility is experienced by graduate students, and that this knowledge can, in turn, be used to improve experiences of disabled students in the future. The theoretical framework I employed in this study draws upon a *social model of disability* (Oliver, 1996, pp. 31-33). Based on this model, disability is presented as a socially mediated problem that is a consequence of how society responds to—or fails to respond to—individuals with disabilities. As a result, the social model attempts to shift attention outward from the individual to various factors within a given social environment (Oliver, 1996). Although the social model has received criticism, for example with respect to its rigid and reductive simplicity (Gabel, 2005; Oliver, 1996), recognizing disability as being more than an individualized problem is vital to producing meaningful research. In particular, Oliver (1996) remarked that:

If the category disability is to be produced in ways different from the individualised, pathological way it is currently produced, then what should be researched is not the disabled people of the positivist and interpretive research paradigms but the disablism ingrained in the individualistic consciousness and institutionalised practices of what is, ultimately, a disablist society. (p. 143)

In this statement, Oliver suggests that if meaningful research is to be gained from the sharing of experiences related to disability, it is paramount that the issues are not located squarely within the individual. Instead, “it is society that has to change, not individuals” (p. 37). Therefore, within the context of this study, disability is recognized as a phenomenon that is connected to factors outside of embodiment. This in turn implies that, “disabled people are *not the* subject matter” (Finkelstein as cited in Gabel, 2005, p. 5), rather “disablement (i.e., the social oppression of people with impairments) is the subject matter” (Finkelstein as cited in Gabel, 2005, p. 5).

However, Titchkosky (2009) noted that certain fields have historically tended to treat individuals with disabilities as “objects of inquiry” (p. 41) and disability itself as an “object for research” (p. 42). As a result, some disabled people have endured a history of horrible treatment to further scientific ends (Linton, 1998; Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011). In particular, disabled individuals have been “surgically mutilated, sterilized, lobotomized, euthanized, shocked into passivity, placed in chemical and physical straitjackets, denied education, denied employment, and denied meaningful lives” (Mertens et al., 2011, p. 227). Although these practices occurred in the past, the underlying thought of disability as being a supposedly individual (medicalized) problem still influences certain conceptions of disability today (Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

As a result of this problematic history, it is imperative that further exploration does not give rise to exploitation and that research concerning disability is conducted from positions that value and respect members of the disability community. Therefore, to avoid the oppressive effects that have been associated with approaches that individualize

disability, I use a social model of disability in this study. Attention is directed towards viewing how the social environment—in this case, the university—may be problematic and, if necessary, should change (refer to Gabel and Miskovic (2014) for an example of how a university was used as the “unit of analysis” (p. 1148); see also Miskovic and Gabel (2012)). As a result, for the purpose of this study, the institution represents the “object of inquiry” (Titchkosky, 2009, p. 41) and the university’s practices towards (in)accessibility are explored as the “object for research” (p. 42). Through this approach, I have attempted to recognize that “access is a form of perception and thus a space of questions” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 16). Furthermore, understanding of the experience of (in)accessibility is obtained through conversations with graduate students who have experienced the phenomenon firsthand. As a result, graduate students who identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) are positioned as experts in this study. This approach opposes research pathways that investigate and conceive of disability as being an individual problem, whereby the opinions of experts can overshadow the views of the disabled (see Gabel, 2005; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Embracing the notion that “disability is a teacher” (Michalko, 2008, p. 414) who provides valuable insight, the experience of (in)accessibility, then, may shed light on the potentially problematic nature of the institution as opposed to focusing on perceived deficits in the individual.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

This chapter has provided an introduction to the proposed research problem and identified the importance underlying future exploration of the phenomenon. In the next chapter, I will build on the ideas expressed in the introduction by presenting literature

related to experiences of students with disabilities in university settings. Whenever possible, the experiences of graduate students will be included. However, due to the aforementioned gaps in the existing literature, these experiences will also represent the collective experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

In Chapter Three, I describe how the study was conducted using a generic qualitative approach informed by the principles of grounded theory with a constructivist orientation, and why I believed this particular approach was suitable. In particular, I describe how the study was conducted with specific reference to the research methodology, epistemological orientation, as well as the position I took as a researcher. Then I outline site and participant selection procedures, data collection and recording techniques, and data analysis procedures. I conclude with descriptions of the methodological assumptions, the scope and limitations of the data, the techniques used to establish credibility, and the ethical procedures that were followed.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings of the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. First, I provide information about the participants. Second, a definition of accessibility is developed that reflects the collective views of the participants. Finally, the core categories derived from the data are presented, with emphasis on identifying factors that have enabled as well as limited access for the graduate students with disabilities. These categories include the places on campus, the people on campus, and the culture of accessibility.

In Chapter Five, I provide summative and concluding remarks about this study. In particular, I provide an overview of the study and summarize the results that were

found. Following this review, I discuss the implications of the research findings and present the model that emerged from this study. I draw the chapter to a close by making future recommendations to facilitate subsequent research, and providing final conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I present literature that relates to experiences disabled students have had with (in)accessibility at university. Features that have both enhanced as well as limited access for disabled students within the university environment are identified and discussed in relation to (a) the nuances between undergraduate and graduate education, (b) the use of technology and assistive devices, (c) the physical campus environment, (d) the university personnel on campus, (e) the institutional culture, and (f) educational initiatives that can affect (in)accessibility. Whenever possible, issues of (in)accessibility presented in this chapter relate to experiences of disabled graduate students. However, additional sources pertaining to both undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities, as well as students in higher education in general, are used when necessary to augment certain research gaps.

As part of Huger's (2011) analysis related to the development of a "*disability-friendly institutional climate*" (p. 10, emphasis added), she found that "students with disabilities are entering college at increasingly high rates due to legal mandates, sophisticated assistive technology, and improved access to educational accommodations" (p. 3). As the number of disabled students participating in postsecondary education has risen, researchers have noted that there has also been an influx of disabled students pursuing graduate studies (Brus, 2006; Duffett & Latour, 2015; Kim & Williams, 2012; NEADS, 2014; Roberts et al., n.d.) and in students requesting accommodations at the graduate level (Rose, 2010) in the US (see Brus, 2006; Kim & Williams, 2012) and Canada (see Duffett & Latour, 2015, NEADS, 2014; Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010). According to Kim and Williams (2012), rather than entering the workforce, students with

physical disabilities reported that they were more likely to enter graduate school after completing their undergraduate studies. In particular, the authors note that “all [of the] participants mentioned that advanced educational attainment was their major concern rather than a job search after graduation” (p. 848). The participants also identified that further education secured a sense of upward mobility. As a result, Kim and Williams note that “earning the highest degree possible is significant for a person with a disability, as this offers them an enhanced qualification and opportunity for securing employment in the competitive labor market” (p. 849).

Although many disabled students seek out opportunities to further their studies, their experiences in higher education are not always characterized by accessibility. West et al. (1993) identify that “over 86% of the [disabled] students . . . reported that they had encountered barriers to their [postsecondary] education because of their disabilities” (p. 461). Although some graduate students with disabilities were surveyed by West et al., the authors focused predominantly on the experiences of disabled undergraduate students. Similarly, after conducting a comprehensive institutional research project that included several disabled graduate students, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) argue that “there are many ways to exclude disabled people at university” (p. 1145) and “exclusion can take the form of containment” (p. 1145). Olkin (2002b), who focused on disabled graduate psychology students, noted that “students with disabilities often have additional requirements to be successful in graduate school, and they frequently face barriers in their pursuit of a degree” (p. 68). Given that disabled students from various levels of study still report that they encounter barriers while at university, it is important to investigate issues of (in)accessibility within the higher education environment.

With respect to the barriers that exist and affect disabled graduate students, Roberts et al. (n.d.) note that “universities need to fully support inclusion and to be ‘disability friendly’ at the graduate level” (p. 2). However, Farrar (2006), whose research focused on the experiences of disabled postgraduate research students in the UK, reported that “there has been little questioning in the past about whether the research community is accessible to all” (p. 177). Furthermore, according to Jacklin (2011), although “studies of the experiences of students with impairments in higher education are gradually becoming more evident . . . the experiences of postgraduate students with impairments are more limited” (p. 105). Yet while it is recognized as important that higher education should be inclusive and accessible to graduate students with disabilities, research related to this area of study needs to be expanded (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin 2011; NEADS, 2014).

Although there is a lack of awareness about disabled students in graduate education, Grundy, McGinn, and Pollon (2005) identify that some disabled graduate students have used their theses to identify how their disability affected their research as disabled graduate students. Additionally, some researchers have addressed this research gap by conducting studies where disabled graduate students were included under the umbrella of students with disabilities in postsecondary education in general (see Erten, 2011; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kim & Williams, 2012; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; West et al., 1993). Some of these authors also choose to interview faculty members (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012) or students who had recently graduated (Kim & Williams, 2012), or survey a wide range of staff (NEADS, 2014) as well. Alternatively, other researchers have focused on issues as

they pertained to graduate students with disabilities (see Duffett & Latour, 2015; Farrar, 2006; Ganschow, Coyne, Parks, & Antonoff, 1999; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005; Grundy, Pollon, & McGinn, 2003; Jacklin, 2011; Lash, 2013; Myers, MacDonald, Jacquard, & Mcneil, 2014; NEADS, 2014; Nocella 2005; Olkin, 2002a, 2002b, 2010; Parks, Antonoff, Drake, Skiba, & Soberman, 1987; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010; Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010; Sierra-Zarella, 2005). Nevertheless, the area of study related to disabled graduate students remains underdeveloped (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin 2011; NEADS, 2014), especially in Canada (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014). Therefore, it is important to address these research gaps because, as Grundy et al. (2005) stressed, “universities need to support students with disabilities within graduate programs” (p. 454).

The Nuances of Undergraduate and Graduate Students and Scholarship

As previously discussed, more disabled students are choosing to pursue graduate degrees after having completed their undergraduate education. Although it is possible that similarities may exist between undergraduate and graduate disabled studies, Grundy and McGinn (2008) identify that many students have discovered after making this transition that graduate school “entail[s] new challenges for graduate students that they may not have faced as undergraduate students” (para. 1). For example, students in graduate school are typically exposed to new demands such as, “conducting independent research, defending a thesis, working as a research assistant, and participating in academic conferences—that . . . may entail challenges for students with disabilities” (Grundy & McGinn, 2008, para. 3). Based on the results of a study reported by Farrar (2006), *postgraduate research students* in the UK (or those who would be recognized as

graduate students in this study) also supported this notion, but many added that they felt as though they began their research ill-equipped to cope with challenges they would soon face. However, some students are excited about the novel challenges graduate school poses. Drennan and Clarke (2009) report that “students who enter a master’s programme want to experience a level of education that is substantially different from their undergraduate experience” (p. 496).

Once disabled students make the transition into graduate school, however, Rose (2010) notes that some of the undergraduate accommodations will not necessarily translate to graduate-level education—particularly in programs that are research based. Furthermore, graduate students with disabilities are expected to “become more independent learners as time goes on, and rely less on accommodation over time, partially because they will have chosen to specialize in academic disciplines complementary to their academic strengths” (p. 7). Although the research presented by Farrar (2006) identifies that the notion of independence was an important characteristic for disabled postgraduate researchers to demonstrate and maintain, it was also identified that access to independence can be enhanced, at times, through the provision of “timely support, advice, guidance or information” (p. 184). As a general principle, Grundy and McGinn (2008) also support the notion of promoting independence for disabled graduate students. In particular, they argue that:

Emerging independence is an important characteristic of graduate education, which should not be circumvented by accommodation choices. This is why it is critical for students with disabilities to become self-advocates and participate in the creative problem-solving process of identifying suitable accommodations for

themselves that may extend beyond the traditional means promoted by disability support offices. (para. 11)

Similarly, Duffett and Latour (2015) reported that approximately two-thirds of disabled graduate students surveyed for a Canada-wide study used accommodations they had devised themselves, but 90% of the respondents still registered with the disability support office. However, according to Farrar (2006), questions about the accessibility of research at the postgraduate level of study in the UK have been overshadowed by the belief that students enter graduate school prepared to accommodate their disabilities independently:

It is easy to make the assumption that a disabled student who has made it through to doctoral study will come fully equipped with the confidence, learning management strategies and adaptive technology acquired through previous study to tackle the next stage of education. From that perspective, it may appear unnecessary and possibly detrimental to the independence of a research student to make any adjustments to existing policies and practice from admissions and induction to completion of thesis, viva [a process similar to a thesis defense], and career planning. (p. 177)

However, there is tremendous diversity inherent in disability with respect to how disability manifests (see Olkin, 2002a, 2002b, 2010; Rose, 2010), how disability is experienced (see Kim & Williams, 2012; Myers et al., 2014), and how disability is viewed by participants (see Kim & Williams, 2012).

Given that disabilities often manifest in idiosyncratic ways, Olkin (2002b) argues that the collective grouping of disabled students cannot be assumed to be simply

homogeneous. Disabilities can appear at any stage in life and, as a result, can affect disabled students differently in terms of their level of familiarity with accommodations:

Some students have disabilities that were apparent or identified early, and came through the educational system with accommodations and individualized education plans. In contrast, other students have recently incurred a disability (e.g., through accident, or degenerative processes), or even have a brand new diagnosis. We cannot expect these disparate students to relate to their disabilities in the same way, to have similar self-advocacy skills, and to feel equally comfortable with identification with the label “person with a disability.” . . . We must recognize these profound differences among students with disabilities, and not treat them as if they were a homogenous group. (p. 77)

For example, some students do not discover that they are disabled until they enter graduate school where the conditions of the academic environment can make “well-disguised reading difficult[ies] . . . more noticeable, severe and debilitating” (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010, p. 25).

Awareness can also be complicated because a disability does not necessarily manifest in a stable manner (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Roberts et al., n.d.). For example, Roberts et al. (n.d.) note that disabilities can range from temporary to ongoing to chronic conditions, and this can affect how they are addressed in graduate school:

Shorter-term, temporary conditions are often more easily understood and mechanisms for medical leaves typically exist in institutional policies so that students can take a stop-out period from their work, with tuition relief, time extensions that reflect the stop-out period, and so on. *Long-term, ongoing*

disabling conditions that present fairly predictable trajectories over time require a more sustainable approach, with attention paid to how the student will interact with program requirements and how time and funding will affect participation. Finally, those *chronic conditions* in which the need for temporary but unpredictable stop-out periods may be necessary often present the greatest challenge in providing accommodations and the greatest need for flexibility, individualization and academic support. (p. 10, emphasis added)

As these conditions manifest, it appears easier to understand and accommodate short-term or temporary conditions as opposed to less predictable or chronic ones. A lack of understanding also shaped many of the barriers experienced by disabled research students because most were found by Farrar (2006) to be “inadvertently erected” (p. 177) at various transition points throughout their studies. This research suggests that there is a need to better understand the experiences of (in)accessibility for disabled students at the graduate level. In the next section, the issues of (in)accessibility of higher education for disabled students will be explored with respect to physical environments and personnel on campus.

The Use of Technology and Assistive Devices

Disabled students frequently use technological devices to accommodate their specific needs in the postsecondary educational environment (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010). For example, to ensure access, many students reportedly use assistive software (Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), such as “text to speech and speech to text software” (Miskovic & Gabel, 2012, p. 236), tape recorders (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010),

hearing devices (Grundy et al., 2005; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012), alternative textbooks (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), and scanners (Miskovic & Gabel, 2012). Farrar (2006) also reports that one dyslexic graduate student considered that the computer functioned like a wheelchair in order to make information accessible. As a result, access to postsecondary education for disabled students has been enhanced, in part, because of the availability of assistive technology (Huger, 2011). Furthermore, according to West et al. (1993), “over 60% of respondents indicated that they were reasonably or very satisfied with the availability of special equipment and classroom, curriculum, and registration modifications” (p. 459).

Technological accommodations can enhance accessibility, but Rose (2010) notes that there is an expectation for disabled students to become progressively self-reliant over time given access to such devices. For example, she states that, “the proliferation of technological aids, software programs and transition programming . . . are deployed in ways that (it is hoped) will render many students less dependent upon basic accommodation strategies” (p. 7). Although technology offers certain benefits to individuals, it is important to recognize that technology cannot address every possible issue of inaccessibility. According to Titchkosky and Michalko (2009b), like education:

Technology, too, is often presented as the “great equalizer” in relation to disability. Voice recognition and speaking software programs, for example, are typically understood as technologies that allow disabled people to participate in many realms of public life, including education and work. But the matter is not as straightforward as that. Assistive technology is sometimes understood as

“levelling the playing field” and thus as something that allows. Again the matter is not as straightforward as that. (p. 228)

As a result, assistive technology can sometimes add another layer of challenges for disabled students in the educational environment.

Although Farrar (2006) notes that academics operate within a “highly literate research culture” (p. 180), she found that the “the sheer volume of reading which research demands can pose problems, particularly for dyslexic students, but also for students who use adaptive software or whose impairment means that they are unable to sit for long periods in one position” (pp. 179-180). In particular, Farrar also reports that one participant who identified as blind found that assistive technology was slow and problematic with respect to presenting certain formatted materials. For example, [s]he states that:

It took a while for my supervisor to realise just how slowly I could read. This is accentuated by the subject-specific notation which includes a significant number of sub- and super-scripts, symbols etc. These are both difficult to read, even using access technology, and completely impossible for an OCR (scan and read back) system, my preferred method of reading, to handle. Diagrams were also difficult to access, as these were often three-dimensional plots which took a good deal of time to study for the important detailed information that they include. (p. 180)

Similarly, Grundy et al. (2003) also identify that, in relation to the primary author’s needs as a graduate researcher with a hearing disability, technology did not generate reliable solutions to issues of accessibility. As a graduate student, Grundy had identified that she wanted to conduct a qualitative-based research study (Grundy & McGinn, 2008) to

satisfy her graduate program's exit requirements (Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005). However, given that the primary author was hard of hearing, she found transcribing data was extremely difficult or impossible using traditional research methods:

I am not able to hear verbal words and sounds without “seeing” what is communicated. Therefore, listening to audiotapes and other audio devices is impossible for me. Knowing this, I tried transcribing a videotaped interview session. I soon discovered that I could not simultaneously lip-read, translate visual speech patterns into text, and type. (Grundy et al., 2003, p. 24)

Furthermore, Grundy et al. (2003) note that this matter was confounded further because, once transcripts were created, it would have required the researcher to confront similar challenges to verify the transcripts. Similar to Titchkosky and Michalko (2008), Grundy et al. (2003) also state that under these circumstances technological devices, such as voice-recognition software, are not necessarily reliable for researchers who identify as hard of hearing. For example, Grundy et al. note that the primary author was not able to verify the transcripts because the original data were still presented in an auditory format. In addition, technologies—including assistive devices—are not always reliable given that they inevitably deteriorate and stop functioning over time.

Due to the aforementioned complexities and limitations, Grundy (Grundy et al., 2003; see also Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005) had to devise a creative strategy in order to make the research environment accessible. After collaborating with her advisor and coauthor (a graduate-level participant from her initial research project), the group documented the approach they used to make auditory interview data accessible

for the primary author (see Grundy et al., 2003). In particular, to avoid having to have an outside source to create transcripts (Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003), the *participant-as-transcriptionist method* was established, whereby “the participant serves as the transcriptionist, with editorial control to create a transcript from an interview” (Grundy et al., 2003, p. 24). This approach may be regarded as being particularly accessible because, as Grundy and McGinn (2008) report, the “participant-as-transcriptionist approach allowed Annabelle [Grundy, the graduate student researcher] to maintain her independence and limit[ed] her reliance upon third-party assistance” (para. 4).

Although this approach made the research process accessible to the primary author, other researchers may benefit from the practice (Grundy et al., 2003). According to Grundy et al. (2003), “the participant-as-transcriptionist method is inclusive for a range of researchers: those who are hard of hearing, those with other disabilities, and those who lack the time or other resources to create their own transcripts” (p. 24). Consequently, this accommodative practice can benefit a variety of individuals conducting research well beyond the graduate level of study. However, Grundy et al. (2003) also caution that the participant-as-transcriptionist method is not suited for every type of research project or participant. For example, the authors note:

One major caveat to our approach is that the participant must have the necessary tools, skills, and incentive to be able to produce a written transcript. . . . For some participants or potential participants, transcription may be too difficult, time consuming, or burdensome. The participant-as-transcriptionist approach is intended to open up new possibilities to be inclusive and collaborative, not to be

used as a means to exclude particular participants from engaging in a research project. (pp. 30-31)

Instead, the participant as transcriptionist method serves as an “alternative to traditional research practices that may work in some settings” (p. 31). Therefore, care must be taken to determine the suitability of the approach for the type of research conducted and choice must be provided to participants so as not to exclude anyone from participating fully in the research process (Grundy et al., 2003).

The Campus Environment

Graduate students with disabilities reported experiencing physical barriers on campus that limited accessibility. Several authors reported that the physical campus was not inviting or accessible to graduate students with disabilities (see Erten, 2011; Farrar, 2006; Myers et al., 2014; West et al., 1993). For example, according to West et al. (1993), some of the participants identified barriers such as, “buildings with no elevator or terrible freight elevators, inaccessible lab space, [and] inaccessible computer labs” (p. 461). The principal author from Myers et al. (2014) also reported experiencing similar problems with respect to inaccessible faculty office spaces and student services due to nonexistent elevators, inaccessible classroom locations due to broken elevators, and inaccessible buildings due to a scarcity of automatic door openers. Similarly, Farrar (2006) indicates that, at times, there were physical barriers on campus that made the research culture inaccessible and limited participation. Like Titchkosky (2011), Farrar (2006) found that these barriers were often not thought about particularly in relation to decision making about how physical space within the university would be used. For example, the needs of disabled postgraduate research students were sometimes forgotten

with respect to event planning and research activities (Farrar, 2006). However, according to Titchkosky (2011), access may be something that is difficult for nondisabled persons to grasp because “the expected workplace participant is the result of being educated to not notice the absence of disability” (p. 83). In the section below, I will present literature related to how disabled students can experience (in)accessibility at university in relation to (a) buildings, (b) winter weather, (c) parking and transportation, and (d) inaccessible academic events.

Buildings

West et al. (1993) reported that “schools have a tremendous degree of flexibility in the means by which they accommodate students with disabilities” (p. 456) and, as a result, a “class may be moved to an accessible building to accommodate a student with physical disabilities, rather than making all buildings on campus accessible” (p. 456). However, the manner in which this is done is not always welcoming (see Myers et al., 2014). Furthermore, some institutions have also constructed new buildings while attempting to address accessibility issues on campus. However, based on the experiences reported by Myers et al. (2014), the primary author found that despite the intention to make these building accessible, key accessibility features in the environment—such as automatic door openers or the importance of elevators—were overlooked in the construction of some of the newer buildings on campus. For example, when a new building was constructed—and “championed for its environmental friendliness” (p. 77)—unanticipated barriers continued to emerge and limit her access. Although the new building afforded greater room in some locations to move around and entry into the building was facilitated by the provision of an automatic door, she noted that “once inside

the building there are no accessible doors” (p. 77). As a result, the primary author from Myers et al. (2014) reported that she “f[ound] this to be offensive, as though [she was] allowed to enter the building, but not entitled to attend classes, or use the graduate facilities without eliciting the assistance of another person” (p. 77). Furthermore, although she noted that it was possible for her to make alternative arrangements for meetings, she stressed that the “lack of accessibility severely decreased the level of independence that [she] was used to” (Myers et al., 2014, p. 77). Consequently, these experiences with inaccessibility made her feel unwelcome on campus.

Olkin (2002b) warns that denying disabled graduate students access to the academic environment contravenes rights to which they are entitled. Myers et al. (2014) reaffirm this, based upon the primary author’s experience, by stating that “structural barriers were still infringing upon [her] rights” (p. 78). Olkin (2002b) likens circumstances where disabled students are treated differently—for example, when they are made to use separate entrances—to the civil rights mandate that “separate is not equal” (p. 69). Instead, she suggests that graduate students with disabilities have the right:

For accessibility to be achieved in such a way as to maximize integration to the greatest extent possible. This means that if there are three seating areas where students tend to congregate, all three should be accessible to students with disabilities, and if a student with low vision sits in the front row, care should be taken to set up the room so that other students also sit in the front row. (p. 70)

Similarly, Myers et al. (2014) notes that “universities need to consider the spatial needs of (dis)Able students, creating physical infrastructure that is accessible and thus welcoming to all students”(p. 78), but the primary author occasionally “felt as though the

university was too ashamed to have someone who was not able-bodied use the main entrance” (p. 77).

West et al. (1993) identify that “many of the barriers described by respondents were related to services and accommodation needs that were disability specific, such as architectural barriers for students with physical disabilities” (p. 461). Myers et al. (2014) reinforce this finding by reporting that numerous places on campus were not accessible to her while she tried to arrange accommodations through disability support services on campus. Although the office eventually relocated to a newly constructed building, the primary author found the new building was not accessible to wheelchair users (e.g., she could not physically enter exam rooms or offices in the new building). As a result, she was not able to conduct meetings with her disability support staff in a private manner because the only spaces she could access were the lobby and the doorways in the new building. Due to the inaccessibility of the newly constructed disability support service office, arrangements had to be made with the university she previously attended as an undergraduate student in order to ensure she had access to accessible services. Although the primary author from Myers et al. (2014) noted that this worked in her favor, given that she had strong relationships with the support staff at the previous institution, the incident reinforced her belief that she was not always welcome as a disabled student on campus. Alternatively, West et al. (1993) found that a “substantial proportion of students indicated that they were reasonably or very satisfied with the physical accessibility of new construction, but a smaller percentage indicated satisfaction with accessibility of retrofitted buildings and campus grounds” (p. 459). Myers et al. (2014) did note, however, that improvements had been made to some newly constructed buildings. For

example, one new building was considered accessible because it was “located centrally on campus and ha[d] two elevators with voice activation” (p. 77).

Winter Weather

Barriers related to the physical accessibility on campus also extended beyond buildings and related to challenges associated with navigating the outdoor campus terrain (see Erten, 2011; Myers et al., 2014; West et al. 1993). Furthermore, barriers navigating outdoor campus space amplified during winter (Erten, 2011; Myers et al., 2014). For example, one participant with a physical disability featured in Erten (2011) reported that “mobility issues are really tough at the school because of the hill, ice and weather” (p. 106). Similarly, in Myers et al. (2014), the principal author found that:

Sidewalks were treacherous, particularly in the winter months. While able-bodied individuals can simply traverse through deep snow, I am unable to do so. Often when the sidewalks are ploughed, the snow is placed on the curb cuts; of course, these curb cuts are what allow me to cross the street. Several times, I found myself stuck in the snow [and] required the assistance of one to two people to help me get out. Although I have lodged several complaints about this issue to the coordinator of the accessibility centre, five years later, it still happens. (p. 77)

As a result, the graduate student faced physical barriers associated with navigating the campus environment outdoors as well as systemic issues related to dealing with administrators who failed to resolve the identified challenges after several years.

Parking and Transportation

Although some environmental barriers were seasonal, physical barriers related to parking can affect disabled participants year round. West et al. (1993) report that “inadequate or inconvenient handicapped [or accessible] parking was cited as a major barrier by a large number of respondents with physical or health impairments, limiting their access to classes, professors, administrative offices, social events, and other activities” (p. 466). For example, participants identified challenges associated with the external campus and parking, such as navigating the “long distance between handicapped [or accessible] entrances in buildings” (p. 461) and “parking [and] traveling from building to building” (p. 462). As a result, West et al. suggest that:

Postsecondary institutions should make every effort to provide adequate parking for students with physical disabilities, and to enforce handicapped [accessible] parking regulations. . . . Efforts should also be initiated to heighten the awareness of the student body, faculty, and staff concerning the essential need for reserved spaces, and consequences for violations. (p. 466)

West et al.’s research suggests that increased awareness can help to address the issues of inaccessibility on campus.

At times, issues related to transportation also required flexibility and accommodations. For example, Olkin (2010) cautions that when students have to complete fieldwork, faculty and fieldwork supervisors should recognize that “persons with low vision or blindness do not drive and hence rely on public transportation or paratransit” (p. 80). Consequently, she stressed that it was important for stakeholders to

reflect on the accessibility of transportation services to determine if expected arrival times were appropriate and if travel time and location jeopardized student safety.

Inaccessible Academic Events

Authors identified a need to ensure that disabled graduate students can gain access to the *research culture* (Farrar, 2006, p. 182), which included both informal events such as meetings amongst peers or university staff (Farrar, 2006; Myers et al., 2014) as well as formal events such as academic conferences (Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005) and graduation ceremonies (Myers et al., 2014). According to Farrar (2006), “the exchange of ideas, methods and knowledge in informal settings like the base room for a research team, the coffee lounge and the bar is an accepted and vital element of the research culture” (p. 182); however, she found that many disabled postgraduate research students were excluded from social events and networking opportunities because of inaccessible aspects of the physical environment. Grundy and McGinn (2008) recommend that “conferences need to be organized to include students and other scholars with disabilities, so that all conference attendees' experiences will be equitable, enjoyable, and mutually beneficial” (para. 7). However, Grundy et al. (2005) describe how some presentations at academic conference were (in)accessible. For instance, the physical size or the layout of the room often limited access to conference proceedings for the primary author who identified as hard of hearing:

Large paper sessions were not very accommodating because of background noise and the seating distance (most seats were too far away to allow lip reading). . . .

Presenters were often seated directly in front of a window such that it was difficult to see their lips against the bright sunlit background. (p. 461)

The orientation in which speakers faced when talking also influenced the primary author's ability to lip read; presenters who faced her directly enabled lip reading whereas those who did not restricted her participation.

Grundy et al. (2005) acknowledge that being able to self-identify and raise awareness about one's particular accommodation needs in advance of conference sessions typically enhanced access at academic events whereas the inverse was true when opportunities to raise awareness were not possible. Once fellow academics became aware of the particular practices required to fully include the identifying graduate student during the conference (e.g., facing students with hearing disabilities directly when speaking; maintaining an unobstructed view of a speaker's mouth while talking; wearing an FM system, if appropriate), they reportedly embraced the practices (Grundy et al, 2005). Under these circumstances, the act of raising awareness served to enhance accessibility. Although requested accommodations made the smaller conference more accessible for the graduate student (Grundy et al., 2005), Huger (2011) reports that more proactive measures should be taken by student leaders to include disabled graduate students—a notion that appears relevant to all leaders within the academic community. For example, she recommends that student leaders should “hold events and meetings exclusively at accessible venues, including on- and off-campus locations” (p. 10) and “explore means to foster the social integration of students with disabilities” (p. 10). Therefore, based on these studies, raising awareness and adopting proactive measures to foster social integration of disabled students can hopefully improve access to the educational environment and the research culture for disabled graduate students.

Beneficial Spaces on Campus

Although the physical academic environment was shown to create barriers that limited accessibility for some disabled students, elements of the physical campus could also reportedly enhance accessibility. Based on a single case study of one disabled graduate student who studied in the UK, Jacklin (2011) notes that the participant found the physical layout of her undergraduate campus enhanced accessibility because large rooms, with comfortable and private seating, were available for students to use. The participant reported that these rooms provided both a peaceful location where students could rest and relax in general, as well as a safe space where she could feel comfortable having a seizure. Consequently, these rooms served to offset restrictions that manifested from her disability on campus. However, when the participant relocated to a new university to complete her master's degree after finishing her undergraduate program, she identified that she did not have access to or awareness of a similar style resting room.

University Personnel on Campus

With respect to disabled research students, Farrar (2006) identifies that several personnel on campus work with disabled postgraduate research students during the course of their studies and “intervene at key points” (p. 177). In particular, she notes that “interventions are made by different people—graduate school administrators, those giving telephone advice to prospective applicants, principal investigators, research managers and research supervisors, dedicated careers advisers, external examiners for thesis and viva” (p. 177). In the sections below, I elaborate on the ways administrators, disability support service providers, and faculty reportedly influence issues of (in)accessibility for students with disabilities at university.

Administrators

Nocella (2005) claims that administrators treated him as “a test subject for their administration’s office” (p. 150) at one institution. However, when administrators have a sense of awareness about the needs of students with disabilities at their institutions, they are better prepared to promote accessibility on campus (Huger, 2011) and to address barriers that limit participation (Farrar, 2006). Huger (2011) recommends several strategies administrators should consider, which include “provid[ing] a departmental environment and physical space that allows all students to access personnel and resources” (p. 9) and “collaborat[ing] with offices of disability services in order to understand the student population and appropriate terminology” (p. 9).

Essential requirements and reasonable accommodations. Within the literature, material related to administrators and students with disabilities in graduate school focused mostly on the importance of designing policy that clearly defines essential requirements in order to establish parameters to regulate accommodation provision (see Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010). Reasonable accommodations were also identified as being an important component of ensuring access for disabled students in postsecondary education (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kim & Williams, 2012; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010; Roberts et al., n.d.) and employment (Kim & Williams, 2012). Although Roberts et al. (n.d.) and Rose (2010) state that administrators should ensure that essential requirements are not compromised by the use of accommodations, Erten (2011) identifies that some university staff had negative attitudes about the use of accommodations. One of the participants from the latter study explained that “the point of accommodations is so that you can be treated equally and operate as any other student” (p. 108). Similarly,

while Olkin (2002b) observes that “graduate programs are invested in providing equal opportunity for education, services, and training to all students” (p. 70), she cautions that:

Programs erroneously may promote the value of equality (i.e., sameness) over equity (i.e., fairness). But students with disabilities have individualized needs which require individualized solutions. They have the right to equity, i.e., to appropriate accommodations, and to receive these accommodations without being made to feel that they are being advantaged over other students. (p. 70)

Therefore accommodations should not be regarded as “privileges” (Erten, 2011, p. 108) or “special needs” (Oklin, 2002b, p. 70). Rather accommodations are “a civil right of students with disabilities” (Oklin, 2002b, p. 70) as well as a vehicle to address barriers that may otherwise disadvantage disabled students (Erten, 2011; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010). Roberts et al. (n.d.) reaffirm this notion by noting that “appropriate accommodations enable students to meet the essential requirements of their course or program successfully, with no alteration in standards or outcomes” (p. 12). As a result, the authors note that “it is important to examine potential ways in which academic requirements may be achieved through alternative means, both to retain the fundamental integrity of a curriculum and to explore flexible strategies that constitute accommodations” (p. 3).

Generally, when reasonable accommodations are provided in the postsecondary education environment, this can include measures such as the use of extra time to complete assignments (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012) or tests and exams (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Myers et al., 2014; Oklin, 2002b; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), the use of alternative testing environments (Myers et al., 2014), the presentation of course

material in an alternative format (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), the use of assistive technology (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010) and tape recorders (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), the use of a note-taker (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010), and the ability to access learning material in advance of class (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010; Olkin, 2010). Olkin (2010) also suggests a variety of ways to make written material accessible for students who identify as blind or having low vision:

[Students] may be able to read print, but prefer large font (generally a minimum of 18 point), black writing on white paper, and adequate lighting (reducing glare but keeping a good source of light, not the soft lighting often found in therapy settings). Handouts can be prepared in advance with a copy in large print. Some persons with low vision may prefer to receive handouts and other print items via e-mail so that they can use their own screen adaptations (e.g., enlargers) to read materials. (p. 80)

Based on this literature, there are a variety of ways to provide accommodations to disabled students at university.

Although accommodation recommendations are relevant to a variety of stakeholders on campus (e.g., administration, student services staff, faculty, et cetera), administrators may be charged with making accommodation related decisions under certain circumstance. For example, universities and departments may also have to allow for greater flexibility for disabled students to complete their programs by affording them the use of time prior to (Myers et al., 2014) or after the end of (Sierra-Zarella, 2005) the official academic term (Myers et al., 2014; Sierra-Zarella, 2005). This, in turn, can enable

students “to spread out [their] course work into a more manageable schedule” (Myers et al., 2014, p. 84) or “to finish courses without having to drop out” (Sierra-Zarella, 2005, p. 143). Furthermore, policies should be made available that clearly define what is expected of graduate students (Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Olkin, 2002b; Rose, 2010), which may, in turn, provide necessary clarity about accommodations and essential requirements in graduate school (see Roberts, n.d.; Rose, 2010). By communicating this information, it may also clarify the nature of accommodations and support services amongst members of the professoriate, which some students found to be problematic (see Erten, 2011).

Compliance with accommodation requirements. After reviewing the literature related to disabled graduate students in higher education, one of the foremost studies appears to have been devised by Parks et al. (1987). Based on the analysis of surveyed graduate and professional schools, Parks et al. concluded that there was evidence of noncompliance with American disability-based legislation (e.g. *Section 504*). However, while the results appeared to show that institutional compliance and commitment to supporting students specifically with learning disabilities in graduate and professional schools was lacking, some participants reported that services were provided to students with disabilities in general. The results of their study showed that while approximately 25% of the institutions did have a policy in place to support graduate and professional students with disabilities, several noted that these plans only pertained to students who identified as blind, deaf, or physically disabled. Consequently, this left other disabled students, such as those with learning disabilities, unaccounted for with respect to written policies. The remaining 75% of surveyed postsecondary education institutions indicated

that they did not have a policy in place to regulate the provisions of support services for graduate and professional students with learning disabilities. Based on the data they collected, Parks et al. reported that “institutions of higher education have a long way to go to meet the needs of this handicapped group [of graduate and professional students with learning disabilities]” (p. 186).

According to Parks et al. (1987), several possible consequences could result from a higher education institution’s noncompliance with disability-based legislation. For example, institutions found to be in breach of legislation would be susceptible to legal reprisal and this could, in turn, compromise their public reputations. To avoid these consequences, the authors note that postsecondary education institutions [PSIs] typically preferred to maintain the appearance of an otherwise welcoming environment:

The images which most PSIs attempt to portray to the public are those of academic freedom, support for the value of higher education for all peoples, and the pursuit of intellectual and career development. The failure of PSIs to consider the needs of a pool of potentially talented individuals or to refuse them participation in higher education does not create a positive public image. (p. 186)

However, although higher education institutions could face recourse for their actions, the impact of noncompliance could also affect students. For example, Parks et al. note that a loss of talent could result from not supporting students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, although some learning disabled graduate and professional students have persisted despite unsupportive conditions, the authors found that a “psychological toll” (p. 187) could result from the barrage of negative experiences.

Ganschow et al. (1999) conducted a follow-up study based on the work of Parks et al. (1987). Using similar quantitative procedures, Ganschow et al. (1999) distributed surveys to the professional and graduate schools that were first contacted by Parks et al. (1987) and similar response rates were reported in both studies. Similar to Parks et al. (1987), Ganschow et al. (1999) noted that after nearly a decade, “there ha[d] been little emphasis on programs and services for students with LD in graduate schools” (p. 72). However, despite this, the follow-up study revealed that progress had been made since the time that original study was completed. Ganschow et al. identified that “there seem[ed] to be a much higher level of awareness about LD [students with learning disabilities] and the institution’s services and movement towards compliance with Section 504 [of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act]” (p. 82).

Similarly, legislative progress was also made in Ontario during the 1990s (Lepofsky as cited in Flaherty & Roussy, 2014) during the time that passed between the studies conducted by Parks et al. (1987) and Ganschow et al. (1999). During this period, the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act [ODA]* came into effect in 2001, however Flaherty and Roussy (2014) note that the law was “perceived as a hollow and ineffective statute” (p. 11) because the *ODA* did not impose mandated enforcement mechanisms. But in keeping with the notion of progress, the law was eventually repealed and the *AODA* (2005) along with its corresponding regulations (e.g., O. Reg. 191/11 and O. Reg. 429/07) came into effect shortly thereafter. To ensure that service providers—such as universities—could demonstrate adherence to accessibility standards, various requirements were mandated to foster accountability for accessibility such as the production of accessibility policies (O. Reg. 191/11, s. 3; O. Reg. 429/07, s. 3), practices

(O. Reg. 429/07, s. 3), procedures (O. Reg. 429/07, s. 3), and accessibility plans (O. Reg. 191/11, s. 3; O. Reg. 429/07, s. 3). However, according to Flaherty and Roussy (2014), there is still room for improvement with respect to *AODA* regulations and ensuring accessibility in higher education.

Disability Support Service Providers

According to Parks et al. (1987), only about a half of American graduate and professional schools surveyed reported that they offered support programs to learning disabled students. However, nearly three decades later, Myers et al. (2014) noted that many “postsecondary institutions have established accessibility services on their campuses to help (dis)abled students with access and accommodations to higher education” (p. 74). Consequently, disability support services were identified within the literature as being a valuable support for both graduate as well as undergraduate students with disabilities in university, such that disabled students typically regarded disability support services as being a predominantly positive and helpful resource (Erten, 2011; Myers et al., 2014; West et al., 1993). In particular, West et al. (1993) found that “generally, a majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with accommodations and services” (p. 459). Similarly, Erten (2011) found that “all of the students stated that throughout their university years, the OSD [Office for Students with Disabilities] had been the most distinguished source of support” (p. 108). The primary author from Myers et al. (2014) supported the latter notion by reporting that “the opportunities that [she] was given by the Centre, in retrospect, truly outshone the barriers that [she] encountered” (p. 83). Given these benefits, it is not surprising that Duffett and Latour (2015) reported that

90% of the Canadian graduate students with disabilities surveyed had registered with disability support services.

Although disabled students were generally satisfied with disability support services, specific barriers were experienced that limited accessibility for disabled students when they used (or attempted to use) the department for support. Duffett and Latour (2015) identified that research-based graduate students were significantly less satisfied with supports they received from disability support offices than were non-research based graduate students. Furthermore, as previously discussed, Myers et al. (2014) identified that environmental barriers had prevented the primary author from accessing the department where disability support services staff were located as a graduate student, which resulted in her having to receive accommodations at another university. West et al. (1993) also noted that,

Many of the barriers described by respondents were related to services and accommodation needs that were disability specific, such as . . . limited availability of tutors and notetakers for students with learning disabilities; and for students with sensory disabilities, difficulty in obtaining taped or Braille material, readers, sign language interpreters, and other assistance or equipment. In addition, many students wrote that they were unaware of the services to which they were entitled or which were available, or indicated that services and accommodations were requested and received but were too little, too late. (p. 461)

In the subsections that follow, I outline some of the benefits and barriers associated with disabled students utilizing disability support services to implement accommodations,

such as (a) the role of disability service practitioners, (b) the (lack of) awareness about services, and (c) the need for counseling.

The role of disability service practitioners. According to Huger (2011), “disability services practitioners are primarily responsible for providing appropriate educational accommodations” (p. 8), and their primary task is to “work toward ensuring that the process for being granted and receiving accommodations is not overly burdensome” (p. 8). In addition, disability support service providers are also responsible for “evaluat[ing] documentation that students provide, approv[ing] appropriate accommodations, and ensur[ing] that accommodations are properly administered” (p. 3). Although Huger describes the roles and responsibilities of this group of support workers, discussion related to caseworkers was surprisingly absent in the literature I examined related to graduate students with disabilities.

(Lack of) Awareness about services. Although some disabled students were able to access services on campus, other students lacked important information about the disability support services that could have improved access (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; West et al., 1993). For example, over a year had passed before one disabled student learned that support services were available on campus (West et al., 1993). Another student only learned about the types of services offered by the university’s disability support services centre from a researcher during the course of a study conducted by Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012). The latter participant also noted that, although he had identified his need for accommodation to university staff (e.g., a faculty member and a therapeutic counselor), the therapeutic counselor did not provide him with useful information about how he could access services and obtain accommodations.

Similarly, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) observed that “a few students did not know where to go for help” (p. 1151) and “some disabled students interviewed were unaware that they could be eligible for accommodations” (p. 1151). (They also noted that some were not interested in identifying as disabled or in receiving accommodations.) West et al. (1993) argue that “students with disabilities should not learn of the availability of services and accommodations by accident, or late in their academic careers after receiving grades that may not reflect their effort and mastery of course material” (p. 465).

Almost three decades ago, Parks et al. (1987) found that the majority of graduate and professional schools surveyed failed to advertise the types of services that were offered on campus for students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, although the types of services offered for students with learning disabilities by the graduate and professional education schools appeared to increase, fewer than half of these institutions reportedly promoted the availability of these services on campus. As a result, Ganschow et al. (1999) note that “there is still a need for improvement” (p. 83). To address this need, the authors:

Recommend that college and university service providers foster awareness and advocacy for students with LD in graduate programs on their campuses. Actions such as communicating with graduate deans and university admissions services and developing promotional material that describes graduate services for students with LD would help facilitate this awareness. Service providers also need to make students with LD aware that their services are available at the graduate level. (p. 83)

Once again, Ganschow et al. reaffirm the importance of raising awareness.

According to Titchkosky (2011), bureaucratic practices are commonly used to manage disability and access in the university environment and issues associated with it, but these management practices have a “paradoxical power to make disability an unmanageable state of exceptions in the university environment” (p. 10). Furthermore, the problem with bureaucracy in the university environment is that it can complicate the provision of access (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Huger, 2011). In particular, access to information for disabled students on campus was confounded by the bureaucratic nature of the postsecondary environment (Farrar, 2006; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Huger, 2011)—particularly in relation to disability support services (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Huger, 2011). For example, according to Huger (2011):

The organization of institutions of higher education by department (such as the registrar, campus life, or academic departments) allows efficiency and specialization. However, it also requires students to navigate unfamiliar structures and cross invisible boundary lines in order to access the opportunities on campus that are most suitable to their interests and needs. This process can be detrimental to student learning and growth. (p. 4)

Similarly Gabel and Miskovic (2014) argue that bureaucracy can compromise a disabled student’s ability to access accommodations and services because lack of awareness about the bureaucratic rules and regulations can significantly influence whether a student is accommodated or not. For example, they note that:

To obtain reasonable accommodations, students must: know the law, the policy and procedure, and where to obtain assistance; follow procedures, including obtaining evidence of their disability; and be willing to self-disclose confidential

and often sensitive information. At each bureaucratic decision point, disability can be contained as a result of the lack of information about one's legal entitlement, lack of evidence or inability to obtain evidence, unwillingness to self-disclose, and/or an institutional decision of ineligibility. (p. 1149)

At the postgraduate level, the bureaucratic environment becomes more difficult for current and potential disabled postgraduate research students to navigate because the complex information relating to various regulations and requirements can make expectations confusing (Farrar, 2006). As a result, Hunger (2010) suggests that without proactive measures to make universities' environment and community more accessible and disability-friendly, disabled students have to consult with countless offices to experience an inclusive campus.

To address barriers related to lack of awareness about disability support services, one disabled student recommended that information about the services should be made "more widespread throughout the college community" (West et al., 1993, p. 463). For example, Nocella (2005) argues that disability support service providers at universities could combat lack of awareness by hosting "personal orientations on campus with counselors before school starts" (p. 155). This could include "walking students all over campus, introducing them to their professors and figuring out their daily activities (e.g., where to get food, rest and how to figure out transportation)" (p. 155). After discovering that disabled students had difficulty accessing disability support services on campus, West et al. (1993) also suggest that postsecondary institutions should adopt a proactive approach to raising awareness about available services on campus:

Postsecondary institutions should develop creative means of publicizing the rights of students with disabilities, advertising disability-related services, and promoting self-advocacy for students with disabilities. These means could include presentations during new student orientation, campus newsletters, a students' "bill of rights" posted in classrooms and other conspicuous places, and workshops for students with disabilities focusing on [relevant disability-related legislation], obligations of the institution and its personnel, self-advocacy training, procedures for seeking accommodations, and grievance procedures. (p. 465)

In addition, Olkin (2002b) also notes that policies should be made available in order to raise student awareness about processes and policies related to accessing accommodations on campus.

Of the students who were able to access disability support services, some of them encountered barriers, such as unmet expectations (Myers et al., 2014), unfairness (Myers et al., 2014; Nocella, 2005), and delays (Myers et al., 2014; West et al., 1993) with regards to service provisions. For example, Myers et al. (2014) describe how the primary author was given the impression by caseworkers at the university that she could receive an academic assistant to facilitate with her physical needs while she was on campus. However, when classes started, the primary author quickly learned that this was not the case:

The accommodations that I initially believed to be available from the university were not forthcoming. Partly, I blamed myself for being in such a predicament. I felt I should have asked more questions and sought clarification in my initial meeting with the Centre. If I would have been more precautionous, or less naive, I

could have avoided this situation. I was desperate to find someone to help me, and it took a month and a half to hire someone. (p. 78)

Consequently, the primary author in Myers et al. (2014) was left scrambling to find and hire an assistant while she learned to navigate her new surroundings, and she reported that the event significantly affected her confidence and created delays in her receiving services. Similarly, Nocella (2005) also found the accommodation implementation process was “very inefficient and unfair” (p. 152). According to West et al. (1993), “nearly 73% of respondents were reasonably or very satisfied that their requests for services and accommodations were handled promptly” (pp. 459-460); however, that meant nearly a quarter of those surveyed did not feel they have received prompt service. To minimize delays and the challenges that arise from them, Olkin (2002b) suggests that graduate programs adopt a more proactive role in determining what types of accommodations requirements may present in their program. Otherwise, she noted that “without this planning students with disabilities start each semester already behind, and their chances of success in the program are compromised. Students cannot be evaluated fairly without appropriate accommodations in place” (p. 72).

Some disabled students reported that they had experienced unfairness with regards to accommodations at university (Myers et al., 2014; Nocella, 2005). For example, Myers et al. (2014) note that, contrary to the primary author’s initial belief and the department’s claim, the centre would only help her find an assistant. However, she later discovered that the centre did provide assistants for free to disabled individuals with hearing disabilities. As a result, she argued that it was unfair that the institution recognized the needs of some students with disabilities and not others. Myers et al.

identify that the disability support services department only had limited funds and, as a result, the primary use of the limited resources was directed to students with hearing disabilities in need of interpreters. Furthermore, insufficient funding has serious implications, such as limiting supports and accommodations for disabled research students (Farrar, 2006).

The need for counseling. Graduate students can experience emotional side effects from having to manage their disabilities within the postsecondary education environment (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Olkin, 2010; Parks et al., 1987). In particular, Parks et al. (1987) note that a *personal psychological toll* (p. 187) can result when disabled graduate students frequently experience rejection in graduate school. Although the authors acknowledge that some disabled graduate students positively benefit from academic competition from a psychological perspective, they noted that “there is, however, a feeling among many [learning disabled graduate and professional] students that their unique learning needs and struggles in school have reduced their self-esteem through continual negative experiences with educational institutions” (p. 187). Similarly, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) note that students can become stressed from dealing with the uncertainty of making accommodation requests from professors:

Students often do not know whether an instructor will be flexible until the course has started, leaving them in a liminal discursive space as each new term starts.

Materially, this can create anxiety and other emotions that can interfere with one’s ability to perform well in courses. (p. 1152)

Olkin (2010) also reaffirms the notion of a psychological toll when she cautioned that, in addition to meeting academic responsibilities and implementing accommodations, “the

student with a disability has the extra task of developing as a person with a disability, as well as coping with the complex physical, psychoemotional, and interpersonal needs associated with disability” (p. 77). Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) also reinforce the notion that requesting accommodations can be challenging for some students with disabilities. One participant noted that he felt the school therapist was dismissive of his needs for accommodations and was unwilling to provide him with useful information related to obtaining relevant services. Although it is possible that therapeutic counselors may benefit some students, it is important to recognize that they are part of an on-campus team that should aim to support disabled students.

Faculty

According to Huger (2011), “faculty members are vital partners in accommodation provision and in increasing the inclusiveness of the educational environment” (p. 7). Similarly, Rainwater-Lawler and Yumori (2010) note that “while individual accommodations are important, support from educators is necessary to facilitate optimal student learning” (p. 27). Although students with disabilities generally reported having predominantly positive experiences with professors (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Myers et al., 2014), some experienced occasional difficulties while interacting with professors (Erten, 2011; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Myers et al., 2014). For example, some disabled students reported that barriers to accessibility resulted from professors who had attitude problems (Erten, 2011; West et al., 1993), were not supportive (Myers et al., 2014), or lacked understanding of or sensitivity towards their students’ needs (Erten, 2011; Myers et al., 2014; West et al., 1993).

A common misperception identified in the literature was that students with disabilities were often perceived of as being lazy (Nocella, 2005; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010) despite the concerted effort some disabled students have had to exert to compete equally against their peers in academia (Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010). Some participants felt that professors lacked a sense of understanding beyond the superficial label about hidden or invisible disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) (Erten, 2011). However, some authors have noted that the ability to recognize and comprehend visible disabilities more than invisible disabilities was characteristic of a much broader problem (Olkin, 2010; Sierra-Zarella, 2005). Some reported that students with invisible disabilities are often treated with an “air of suspicion” (Sierra-Zarella, 2005, p. 140), but Olkin (2002b, 2010) noted that this contravened the rights of graduate students. However, that does not mean that individuals with physical disabilities do not experience issues associated with inaccessibility and lack of understanding. Gabel and Miskovic (2014) found that professors also had difficulty recognizing the needs of students with visible disabilities and, in turn, they identified that “containment can also take the form of *ignoring what is in plain sight*” (p. 1154, emphasis added).

Through the act of *ignoring what was in plain sight*, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) also note that the needs of some students were placed above those of others. For example, one professor considered the needs of a student who required religious-based accommodations but simultaneously ignored a student with disability-based accommodation needs. Furthermore, the same physically disabled student also had approved accommodations that specified that notes were to be provided to him in advance of lecture, but these essential accommodations were denied by another instructor

whose concern over budgetary constraints outweighed her or his consideration of the student's accommodation needs. Consequently, Gabel and Miskovic identify that "this particular situation positions two forms of difference . . . in tension with one another. It also sorts students into more-valued or less-valued difference categories" (p. 1153).

Similarly, Myers et al. (2014) support this notion by identifying that:

Staff at university accessibility centres, administrators, and faculty need to be cognizant of the different needs of (dis)Able students. They also need to be mindful of not creating an environment whereby one (dis)Able student is pitted against another (dis)Able student or against the student body. (pp. 79-80)

Therefore, based on the findings presented by Gabel and Miskovic (2014) and Myers et al. (2014), caution should be taken to avoid creating hierarchies that position disability as a lesser priority.

Setting the tone. Not only do faculty play an important role in increasing inclusiveness, but Hunger (2011) notes that "in addition to accommodation provision, faculty *set the tone* for the classroom climate" (p. 8, emphasis added). For example, professors can achieve this by taking steps to ensure instruction, learning materials, and offices are accessible, inclusive, and disability-friendly. In addition, professors are also encouraged to incorporate disability into their instruction (Huger, 2011; Olkin, 2002b). For example, according to Huger (2011), professors can "include people with disabilities in readings, classroom examples, and as guest speakers whenever possible" (p. 8), but this does not always happen in practice (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Olkin, 2002a). In particular, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) report that "several faculty observe that people do not talk openly about disability at university or in classrooms" (p. 1154). As a result, the

inclusion (or exclusion) of disability in the classrooms could be used to set the tone in a positive (or negative) manner. However, another positive approach professors can adopt within their classrooms is the practice of encouraging disclosure (Erten, 2011). To encourage disclosure, professors can share information on course outlines about how students can access disability services and receive accommodations on campus, but this is typically mandated by university policy (Erten, 2011; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014). Research has identified that professors should gain awareness about support services offered to disabled students and encourage students to voluntarily use services when necessary (Erten, 2011; Sierra-Zarella, 2005). For example, one participant suggested to Erten (2011) that:

All professors should make an announcement in class at the beginning of the semester and say: “If you are a student with [a] disability of any kind I encourage you to contact the OSD [Office for Students with Disabilities]. Here is the phone number and you can receive the accommodations you need.”

(p. 109)

Similarly, Sierra-Zarella (2005) recommends that “above all, [professors] should conduct classes in a welcoming, non-judgmental manner to encourage those who need assistance to seek it out” (p. 142). Given these recommendations, professors can set the tone to promote accessibility through simple but effective measures.

Faculty and the importance of flexibility. Once a course has started, it is important for professors to remain flexible. Gabel and Miskovic (2014) note that students in courses were “dependent on the willingness of each faculty member to be flexible regarding student needs” (p. 1152), and as previously discussed, their inability to predict

how (in)flexible professors would be regarding their disability-related needs, in advance of a course, potentially risked causing negative emotions and performance difficulties for students. For example, Gabel and Miskovic found that after a participant adhered to the necessary procedures to inform a professor of his disability and accommodation needs, the instructor misguidedly dismissed the claim and, consequently, undermined the “safety net” (p. 1151) that the student depended on. Furthermore, West et al. (1993) found that some faculty remained inflexible even though legislation required postsecondary education institutions to ensure that programs were accessible.

Sierra-Zarella (2005) note that it is important for faculty to not only be flexible, but to also recognize that “[students] with chronic disabling conditions must live flexibly in anticipation of the changing nature of our disabilities. . . . As a result, we need our worlds to be flexible as well” (p. 141). Due to the nature of certain disabilities, some disabled students require breaks during long lectures (Erten, 2011; Sierra-Zarella, 2005). It is important for professors to recognize that when they do not provide breaks in their class, certain students are forced to make a difficult decision between attending to their physical needs and remaining in class (Sierra-Zarella, 2005). However, some professors demonstrated awareness about the importance of addressing potential barriers and creating alternative plans to make classroom assignments accessible (see Grundy et al., 2005). For example, when the authors from Grundy et al. (2005) bracketed their personal views about inclusive research, McGinn revealed that “as an instructor, I try to remain open to accommodating students’ needs. Students with disabilities understand their strengths and weaknesses far better than I do, so we work together to identify alternatives” (p. 453).

Relationships between faculty and students. Rose (2010) notes that student–supervisor relationships play an important role ensuring that students are successful in graduate school. For example, Farrar (2006) notes that “when partnerships are formed between student and supervisor, there is less dependence, greater understanding and appreciation of alternative approaches to learning and more confident, original work” (p. 179). Similar to the evaluation of professors as previously discussed, doctoral students in general (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007) and disabled master’s and doctoral students in particular (Duffett & Latour, 2015) found their relationships with faculty advisors were typically positive. In particular, Duffett and Latour (2015) state that the majority of Canadian disabled graduate students who participated in the NEADS study identified that they had positive experiences with supervisors and that supervisors had tried to be supportive and understanding of their needs. However, data also indicated that positive interactions with advisors were not necessarily a universal experience.

According to Zhao et al. (2007), certain advising styles can affect how satisfied students, in general, are with the relationships they have with their advisors. Consequently, the authors identify that doctoral students were satisfied with their faculty advisors when staff provided support in relation to “*academic advising*, based on items related to training and progress; *personal touch*, reflecting advisor interest and support beyond purely academic concerns; [and] *career development*, reflecting collegial support, sponsorship and mentorship” (p. 269). In particular, academic advising was found to be the strongest indicator amongst the three correlated factors, but the types of support students received from advisors typically varied amongst different disciplines. For example, “social science and humanities students . . . report[ed] more personal touch

behaviours from their advisors [than students in biological and physical sciences]” (Zhao et al., 2007, p. 271).

Although the element of personal touch was not the strongest indicator amongst the general doctoral student population (Zhao et al., 2007), Cress (2008) identifies that supportive relationships did influence student populations belonging to different diversity groups at the undergraduate level. In particular, she found that, in general, “a strategy for mediating the effects of a negative campus climate is supporting the development of *student–faculty interpersonal relationships*” (p. 106, emphasis added) with respect to a diverse range of students in terms of disability, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, et cetera. In particular, she notes that positive student–faculty interpersonal relationships are beneficial in several ways. For example, “students who feel that faculty treat them with respect, give them honest feedback about their abilities, and provide them with emotional support are less likely to perceive that there is a negative campus climate” (p. 104). Furthermore, Cress (2008) reports that these relationships also conferred material academic benefits to students, such as better grades and increased confidence within the educational environment. Consequently, she notes that “if faculty interact with students in ways that make them feel valued and affirmed both within and outside the classroom, the effect can moderate a negative learning environment and ultimately facilitate positive learning communities for all students” (p. 104).

The literature provides some examples of supportive student–advisor relationships. Some professors who acted as research advisors purposefully supported disabled graduate students to make research more accessible (see Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005). For example, as a faculty member, McGinn’s

openness towards the needs of her student was demonstrated through not only her willingness to foster new accessible research methods (see Grundy et al., 2003, 2005), but also her awareness of and concern for other potentially inaccessible aspects of the research culture, such as academic conferences (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005) and thesis defenses (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008). For example, as an advisor, McGinn demonstrated awareness of and flexibility towards the needs of her supervisee by proactively and collaboratively working to ensure that the defense procedures were designed to accommodate the needs of her supervisee (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008). Farrar (2006) also notes that disabled postgraduate research students were supported in a similar fashion by their faculty supervisors. In particular, she reports that, “[s]ome students described highly inventive solutions they and their supervisors had designed to plan the research” (p. 179).

Institutional Culture

Within the literature related to disabled students and their experiences in the postsecondary educational environment, some authors reflected upon the importance of institutional culture (see Huger, 2011; Jacklin, 2011; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; Rose, 2010). Grundy et al. (2005) allude to the notion of a research culture by referencing the importance of “building an inclusive research community” (p. 455). Similarly, one of the graduate students interviewed by Miskovic and Gabel (2012) encourages “university administrators to facilitate a culture where students will not feel stigmatized” (p. 240). However, Jacklin (2011) found that there were few attempts to actively develop a supportive peer learning culture. As a result, this influenced both the participant’s sense of belonging on campus as well as her willingness to disclose her disability at university.

Furthermore, Miskovic and Gabel (2012) found they could not “talk about disability without taking wide detours into the realms of university culture, policies, and politics” (p. 243). Consequently, interviews with faculty and university staff focused on questions based on concepts such as the *culture of inclusion* (Miskovic & Gabel, 2012, p. 239, emphasis added; see also Gabel & Miskovic, 2014, p. 1154). Huger (2011) notes that “all members of a campus community have a role to play in increasing the academic and social integration of students with disabilities” (p. 3) as well as “improving accessibility and inclusiveness” (p. 3). For example, Rose (2010) stresses that it is important for university stakeholders to “work to develop a broad and pervasive *culture of responsiveness* to the needs of graduate students with disabilities, not only within but well beyond the graduate sector itself” (p. 10, emphasis added). Therefore, in order to foster movement towards a disability-friendly culture, everyone needs to “commit to a culture shift to facilitate the full participation of all students, including those with disabilities” (p. 3).

Sometimes people within the university are let down when they assume that a supportive culture is in place. For example, although Titchkosky (2011) was aware that the culture at large created barriers for disabled persons, she had come to trust the culture at her institution. However, after confronting issues of inaccessibility on campus as a disabled faculty member, she felt let down by the culture and she subsequently recognized that it was a *culture of exclusion* (p. 64). Rather than create a welcoming environment, Olkin’s (2002b) also notes that higher educational institutions sometimes give rise to the notion that disabled students can be burdensome:

The idea of burden gets translated in small but important ways in graduate school: We let the student using a wheelchair know that the barrier removal cost \$3000; we state in meetings that we can't afford something because we're paying over \$10,000 a year in interpreting costs for a deaf student; we have to be continually reminded to read overheads out loud for a blind student; we are annoyed by the student who requests all handouts on disk. . . . In all these ways we never let the student forget that he or she is disabled, and that the disability makes a demand of us. (p. 74)

Similarly, the notion that disabled people can be thought of as burdensome is mirrored by Titchkosky (2011) who accounted for and conceptually analyzed the reasons people provided as to why university spaces and policies had not been made accessible.

Another notion that permeated the university culture, according to Gabel and Miskovic (2014), related to disclosure. After investigating quantitative differences between formally- and anonymously-disclosed disabilities on campus, the authors noted that "as a group, disabled students at [the American university where research occurred] remain culturally represented as [less than] <1%, while in fact, they are about 10% of the student population" (p. 1150). As a result, it was reported that the underrepresentation of disabled students on campus could have material effects on disabled students within the institution. Prior to entry into graduate school, however, Jacklin (2011) reports that many British universities typically try to obtain formal disclosure statistics to assess the number of disabled students who will be transitioning into graduate students. Prior to this transition, she reports that:

Many higher education institutions pre-empt this query by advertising their ‘disability services’ and to varying degrees, by trying to provide an ethos and welcome that conveys the institution as ‘disability friendly’ (e.g., via their web sites and prospectuses). It is, however, a significant step from this to a *culture of active recruitment*, which Ralph and Boxall (2005) found does not tend to be a priority for many institutions. (p. 99, emphasis added)

As a result, the literature reports that there are a number of ways universities can shape culture to be inclusive and accessible or exclusive and inaccessible.

Collective Responsibility

Due to *AODA* legislation, Rose (2010) notes that the university has a collective responsibility to ensure students—including those at the graduate level—are supported. Campus-wide collaboration was also important according to Huger (2011), who notes that a disability-friendly climate could no longer remain the sole responsibility of disability support offices. In particular, she noted that:

A college or university that views all students as members of the campus community who should be able to access all of its programs and services will realize a need for a new way to provide disability services. Disability services then become the job of each member of the community rather than of a handful of trained professionals. This student-focused mind-set must be pervasive throughout the institution in order for true inclusiveness to occur and needs to be supported at all levels of the institution. (p. 5)

By encouraging the development of supportive relationships that are based on collaboration amongst the university community, Huger notes that the benefits of a move

towards an accessible and inclusive university culture can benefit both disabled and nondisabled students. For example, benefits can include full participation and increased responsiveness to student needs. Similarly, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) support the need for change within the classroom; participants in their study identified traditional instructional methods at university as needing to be revised to enhance accessibility.

In order to facilitate a shift towards a more accessible and inclusive university, it is important that collaboration occurs between various stakeholders across the university (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Huger, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Myers et al., 2014). For example, Duffett and Latour (2015) report that collaboration amongst disabled graduate students, supervisors, disability support offices, administration, and disability service providers, was a vital component of supporting disabled graduate students. Some suggested that initiatives such as “awareness campaign[s]” (Nocella, 2005, p. 155) or “sensitivity training workshops” (Erten, 2011, p. 108) could be used to raise awareness. However, Erten (2011) identifies that “educational seminars on disability awareness should not only focus on disability but look at a spectrum of individual differences” (p. 109), so as not to reaffirm stereotypical nor dichotomous beliefs about (dis)ability. For example, one participant suggested that “when you introduce it as disability issues you are creating a binary category of ‘normal’ students and the ‘abnormal.’ It can be looked at as students on a continuum. I think that would be a lot better” (Erten, 2011, p. 109). Instead, Grundy and McGinn (2008) note that “collaboration and communication between students, academics, disability support personnel, and other staff are necessary to: (a) clarify the expectations for graduate

students, and (b) establish and maintain appropriate practices that enable the full participation of students with disabilities” (para. 10).

Huger (2011) suggests that “offices of disability services can provide road maps for institutions as they commit to a culture shift” (p. 3) and “foster a more disability-friendly climate” (p. 8). Faculty, in particular, are encouraged to collaborate with disability support services staff (Roberts et al, n.d.; Rose, 2010; Sierra-Zarella, 2005) or disability support services staff and students (Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008) to enhance accessibility in their classes for students with disabilities. For example, Farrar (2006) notes that, faculty supervisors, disability support staff, and students should collaborate to address certain facets of the research culture that are difficult for disabled graduate students to navigate. Through collaboration amongst these stakeholders, students can conserve valuable resources (e.g., time, energy, et cetera) by not having to fight the system. As a result, students can focus more of their time and attention towards their academic responsibilities.

Proactive Planning and Universal Design

Huger (2011) argues that “rather than reacting to the accommodation requirements of individual students, a truly inclusive environment is prepared for and welcoming to a diverse population” (p. 4). Consequently, proactive measures rather than reactive ones are better suited to meeting the needs of disabled students (Farrar, 2006; Huger, 2011), with respect to both campus (Huger, 2011) as well as faculty-related practices (Farrar, 2006; Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n.d.). The use of universal design principles was a proactive approach recommended within the literature (Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n.d.). Roberts et al. (n.d.), in particular, recommend universal design

methods that are specific to learning, such as “Universal Instructional Design (UID) or Universal Design for Learning (UDL)” (p. 9) strategies. Universal design principles can promote accessibility and inclusion because:

An inclusive campus environment allows all students to interface with the community in a seamless and real-time manner. The philosophy of universal design . . . provides promising guidance for creating such an environment. Students may attend university events, discuss course content with a professor during office hours, or eat dinner with friends without prior planning or coordination. If the environment is constructed in a way that assumes accessibility and inclusiveness, students with disabilities are more easily integrated into the academic and social fabric of an institution. (Huger, 2011, p. 5)

Universal design can also facilitate inclusive instruction in university (Huger, 2011) and in graduate school (see Roberts et al., n.d.) because a greater degree of flexibility is permitted that can, in turn, free students from having to rely on accommodations to secure access (Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n.d.). For example, Roberts et al. (n.d.) notes that “designing curricula in flexible ways that include multiple means of interaction with material, a range of assessment methodologies and a variety of formats reduces the likelihood that students will encounter barriers to equal participation in the learning environment” (p. 9). Similarly, Huger (2011) recommends that faculty use “inclusive educational practices” (p. 8) such as “course readings that are accessible or can be made accessible to students with disabilities” (p. 8). Therefore, access to the physical and pedagogical environment is enhanced through universal design. However, students with disabilities are not the only ones who can benefit from these practices: “good practices

for disabled students generally constitute good practices for all students” (Adams & Brown as cited in Jacklin, 2011, p. 105).

Educational Initiatives

It is important to raise awareness about a wide range of accessibility issues that can affect disabled students at university (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005; Farrar, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012) and the existence of disabled students at university (see Gabel & Miskovic, 2014), particularly as they relate to graduate students (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005). To make postsecondary education welcoming to disabled students, educational initiatives can allow university stakeholders—such as administration, staff, faculty, and students—to gain awareness about students with disabilities and their potential needs within the university environment (Farrar, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Parks et al., 1987; West et al., 1993). In particular, Farrar (2006) notes that “awareness of disability issues and good practice amongst those who promote, interview, inform, induct, support, supervise and assess disabled research students will go a long way to enabling students to tackle more tangible barriers” (p. 185). As a result, educational initiatives may help to create a supportive and equitable environment on campus (Erten, 2011). In this section, I focus on how education can be used to promote accessibility for disabled students within university. Educational initiatives—such as professional development, academic curriculum, and research—are examined in relation to how they can foster a disability-friendly university for disabled students.

Professional Development

Park et al. (1987) identify that “continued education regarding learning disabilities is needed at every level including graduate and professional schools” (p. 187). Furthermore, other research shows that professional development for faculty fosters the provision of support for disabled students and promotes accessibility at university (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012). Awareness raising, according to Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012), is “traditionally understood as the act of informing professors of the various functioning needs of those with differences” (p. 48). They also note that awareness could be raised through a variety of mediums, such as “blogs, newsletters, and presentations created and run by both students and staff in diversity services” (p. 48). Important issues that need to be addressed in postsecondary education include the legal rights of disabled students (Olkin, 2002b; Roberts et al., n.d.; West et al., 1993), the nuances of accommodation provisions and essential requirements (Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010), the issues disabled students may encounter (West et al., 1993), the accommodation and accessibility needs of students with disabilities (Huger, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; West et al., 1993), and the approaches that can be used to support students with disabilities (Nocella, 2005). For example, to foster inclusion and accessibility within class, Huger (2011) recommends that faculty “become knowledgeable about the accommodation needs of students with various disabilities so as to be prepared to fully integrate all students in the educational experience” (p. 8). Furthermore, faculty professional development can be used to address negative attitudes and misperceptions about students with disabilities (Erten, 2011; Nocella, 2005). Otherwise, when faculty do not receive professional development concerning

accessibility for disabled students, Olkin (2002b) cautions that “faculty must rely on their own experiences and knowledge, which may not be the best way to serve students with disabilities” (pp. 75-76). According to Grundy and McGinn (2008), disability support services may also benefit from professional development initiatives. In particular, they note that “disability support personnel need to familiarize themselves with the nature of graduate education and the expectations and opportunities available for graduate students” (para. 10).

Academic Curriculum

To raise awareness, some have argued that issues related to disability should be included as part of university courses (Huger, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Olkin, 2002b; West et al., 1993). Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) note that institutional stakeholders, such as “students, staff, and policymakers should act collaboratively to design course material which integrates a diversity-conscious perspective” (p. 48). For example, West et al. (1993) found that “institutions need ongoing general orientation and education of the student body regarding the need for alternative teaching and testing methods for students with disabilities, which might help eliminate misunderstandings associated with accommodations” (p. 466). Huger (2011) and Olkin (2002b) both note that disability should be included in academic courses. In particular, Olkin (2002b) states that disability should be included on the agenda whenever issues of diversity are featured in a course, noting that “if a . . . course syllabus lists specific minorities, that list should include disability” (p. 74). However, Olkin (2002a) notes that disability-related material was typically missing from the graduate level psychology curriculum. Olkin (2002b)

identifies that the marginalization of disability from other diversity issues in academic courses might be the result of limited instructional time:

This insistence on jumping aboard the diversity train often has the effect of seeming to pit disability against other groups; in the competition for the scarcest resource in graduate school, namely time in the curriculum, the inclusion or expansion of disability bumps ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. But the absence of disability in the curriculum is another way of further isolating and alienating students with disabilities. (p. 74)

As previously discussed, this creates hierarchies of perceived importance that can serve to limit accessibility for disabled students. Furthermore, Olkin (2002a) observes that:

One implication of the paucity of disability courses is that graduate psychology students with disabilities will not see representations of themselves in the curriculum. Not only might students with disabilities feel marginalized, but they could also perceive that the topic of disabilities itself is marginal. (p. 131)

Therefore, while the inclusion of disability within courses can be beneficial to both students with and without disabilities, effort should be made to include disability within the higher educational curriculum.

Research

Parks et al. (1987) identify that institutions with graduate and professional programs typically drew upon neither faculty with professional knowledge (e.g., special education) nor graduate students with research capacities to promote accessibility for learning disabled students. More recently, however, Miskovic and Gabel (2012) state that “research put visibility on the otherwise hidden topic of disability in higher education” (p.

243). For example, Rose (2010) notes how research shared at a conference sparked her professional interest in issues related to graduate students with disabilities. Subsequently, she developed her own research paper to further the academic conversation about administrative concerns about accessibility, accommodations, and essential requirements at the graduate level.

Miskovic and Gabel (2012) also used research to challenge, confront, and change policies and practices within a particular university to advocate for disabled students. Throughout the process, they demonstrated respect for disabled students by “engaging with their needs not as an afterthought or a ‘leftover’ from mainstream student population, but seeing them as an integral part of university life and culture” (p. 243). Similarly, other authors collaborated to produce research related to the experience of making inaccessible components of graduate education and research accessible (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005). For example, after Grundy et al. (2005) reflected on issues of (in)accessibility that they encountered while conducting research and attending conferences with a disabled colleague, the authors incorporated what they learned into their research in order to “prompt other scholars to reflect on the ways that their actions contribute to inclusion and exclusion” (p. 456). Consequently, the resulting publications (e.g., Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005) provide members of the academic community access to material that outlines how alternative research practices have been used to foster accessible scholarship at the graduate level. Myers et al. (2014) also present a paper with a similar purpose and approach in their article, but as it related to the primary author’s experience as a physically (dis)abled student throughout her graduate and undergraduate studies. As a result, the circulation of

research of this nature can hopefully lead to heightened awareness (Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005). This is important, given that the active involvement of disabled students in various aspects of graduate education is “essential to building vital research capacity” (Grundy & McGinn, 2008, para. 12) and “building an inclusive research community where all researchers are enabled” (Grundy et al., 2005, p. 455). By producing research that serves to raise awareness about issues of inclusion and exclusion of disability in scholarship and research among members of the academic community, these authors acted as advocates for inclusive practices in higher education in general and in graduate school in particular.

Sometimes, disabled students can also benefit from research when it enables them to learn more about themselves. One of the graduate students interviewed by Miskovic and Gabel (2012) identifies that having a label for his disability provided him with a sense of awareness about it. In particular, he noted that “once I was able to *label* it as a disability, I was able to study it and understand it” (p.240). Consequently, through various research initiatives, knowledge production can serve as a vehicle to raise awareness and promote accessibility at the individual and the institutional level.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented literature related to the issues and experiences of (in)accessibility in higher education in order to foster awareness about the accessibility needs of and barriers faced by disabled students in graduate school. Given that there are relatively few studies that have focused on disabled students at the graduate level in Ontario and Canada respectively, there is a need to conduct further research in this area of scholarship. Throughout the chapter, I have drawn upon available literature to

demonstrate that students with disabilities in higher education—including disabled graduate students—have identified features in the institutional environment that have both enhanced as well as limited their access. Issues of (in)accessibility were explored in relation to features that both enhanced as well as limited accessibility in university for disabled students in relation to: (a) the nuances between undergraduate and graduate education, (b) the use of technology and assistive devices, (c) the physical campus environment, (d) the university personnel on campus, (e) the institutional culture, and (f) educational initiatives. Recommendations to improve accessibility for disabled students in university in the literature were often discussed in relation to institutional culture and educational initiatives.

In Chapter Three, I outline the methodology that was used to conduct this study and address important ethical and theoretical considerations that are associated with conducting research with disabled individuals.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to better understand the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. I used a generic qualitative approach, informed by the principles of a constructivist-based grounded theory. This approach elicited information about the experiences of these students while simultaneously respecting the need for sensitivity, respect, and social justice towards disability.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology. The chapter describes how the study was conducted with specific reference to the research methodology, epistemological orientation, as well as the position I took as a researcher. Then further descriptions are provided to outline site and participant selection procedures, data collection and recording techniques, and data analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with descriptions of the methodological assumptions, the scope and limitations of the data, the techniques used to establish credibility, and the ethical procedures that were followed.

Methodology

Although the choice of a particular methodology is often connected to selecting the most appropriate means by which to answer the research problem (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), the nature of decision making, in general, is inherently an ethical matter (Rebore, 2001). Therefore while ethics may appear as a secondary concern to some, ethical considerations should be of primary importance in the early stages of the research process. Methodological decisions must move past initial positions of

practicality so that ethical considerations constitute a primary concern of all research relating to disability and other marginalized groups (Hays & Singh, 2012). To achieve this, Mertens et al. (2011) state that, ethically-minded “methodological decisions are made with a conscious awareness of contextual and historical factors, especially as they relate to discrimination and oppression” (p. 233).

However, as previously discussed, the problem with research on disability has been that the disabled have sometimes been treated unethically in the past. Furthermore, the use of statistics when studying experiences of disability can be problematic because of the historical role this method of analysis played in the eugenics movement (see Davis, 2006). During the eugenics period, statistical methods were reconfigured to classify and cast out people who were perceived to have undesirable characteristics—such as persons with disabilities—from the general population in an attempt to preserve so-called normalcy. Furthermore, Davis (2006) notes that:

The norm pins down the majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve. This curve . . . became in its own way a symbol of the tyranny of the norm. Any bell curve will always have at its extremities those characteristics that deviate from the norm. So, with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviation or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants. (p. 6)

As a result, statistical methods of inquiry have evolved out of a legacy that has not valued the disabled (see Davis, 2006) and that, in turn, conflicts with the guiding philosophy in this study that disability is a “difference that makes a difference” (Michalko, 2008, p.

414). For these reasons, I have resisted the use of statistical methods in this study to avoid perpetuating notions of normalcy with respect to disability.

That being said, some researchers favor quantitative methods of study that prescribe collecting quantifiable data, asking narrowly focused questions, and analyzing them from a statistical perspective (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Titchkosky and Michalko (2009) note, however, that quantitative methods become troublesome when “measuring people’s unfortunate problems” (p. 3) and this is often a primary concern of certain types of research involving disability. Statistical analysis has also been identified as problematic to disability research because representations acquire meaning by drawing comparisons between certain populations to an artificially constructed norm (Davis, 2006), and “although predicated as natural and true, the rule of the norm is statistically derived, negating the diversity to be found within nature and the naturalness of diversity” (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 86). As a result, quantitative methods can also have practical limitations, such that there can be a tendency to reduce the dynamic experience of disability to a set of numbers (see Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Furthermore, according to Titchkosky (2009), research focused on the normalization of disability is typically problematic in that “disabled persons are deciphered but not understood” (p. 55). Given this context, a quantitative approach would, with respect to this study, likely limit significance derived from the detailed experiences of those with disabilities.

Although numbers may be an objective way to describe certain actions, processes, or events (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), as previously discussed, their improper use on the disabled have under certain circumstances served to objectify and

oppress. However, histories of oppression can be used to foster transformative action (see Freire, 2005). After becoming acquainted with Disability Studies literature, it became apparent that the historically oppressive manner in which disability has been examined has necessitated the redefinition and reconstruction of how disability is studied today (see Davis, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Although these potentially oppressive methods have been subjected to critique within the literature, and despite the clear articulation to transform how disability is explored in research, some authors argue that the espoused rhetoric has not been mirrored by a significant shift in practice (Gabel & Peters, as cited in Gabel, 2005; Ruggles Gere, 2005). In particular, Ruggles Gere (2005) identified that “statistics, the concept of the norm, and the attendant notions about various populations continue to permeate much of the epistemology of our field [e.g., Education]” (p. 62). Therefore, qualitative methods were employed in this study.

Adopting a Qualitative Approach

To avoid the perpetuation of oppressive practices, Mertens et al. (2011) urge researchers to adopt “nonalienating” (p. 230) research methods. Furthermore, Mertens et al. stress that dialogue and partnership are important components of transformative research. While the authors note that adherence to a transformative paradigm is not rooted to any particular method or interpretive practice, “the inclusion of a qualitative dimension in methodology is critical in order to establish a dialogue between the researchers and the community members” (p. 233). This study, in turn, is rooted in a qualitative framework in order to recognize the transformative potential that can result through dialogue and shared understanding. This appears to be important because, as

Creswell (2008) noted, qualitative research should be aimed at promoting positive change and improving the quality of life of affected individuals.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), contemporary qualitative research is a respectable approach that “crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter” (p. 3). In particular, the authors define qualitative research as being:

A set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Consequently, under a qualitative methodology, researchers look to the detailed experiences of participants to shape their understanding of a particular phenomenon. This is achieved by asking broad, open-ended, questions to produce rich dialogical data, which are subsequently analyzed for themes that inform the given topic in a subjective, value-laden, manner (Creswell 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). In turn, researchers often collect data in the form of rich descriptions based on mediums, such as “personal experience, introspection, life story, [and] interview” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, pp. 3-4) in order to “describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (p. 4). Therefore, through a qualitative approach, various sources of information can be solicited to advance an in-depth understanding of the central problem of study.

To advance the understanding of experiences with (in)accessibility at university, this study utilized qualitative methods such as interviewing to engage participants in conversations based on their personal experiences, introspective accounts, and stories related to the phenomenon. Furthermore, a qualitative research approach aligned with current Disability Studies in Education literature advising that disability should be explored using “conceptual frameworks that encourage fluid ways of interpreting disability experiences” (Gabel, 2005, p. 7). Consequently, the underpinning philosophy of appreciating “difference that makes a difference” (Michalko, 2008, p. 414) served as a conceptual guide in the study. In turn, individual experiences with (in)accessibility were used to reveal how society—or in this case, the university—might be problematic. (Refer to Gabel and Miskovic (2014) for an example of how a university was used as the “unit of analysis” (p. 1148); see also Miskovic and Gabel (2012).) Qualitative methods of inquiry therefore enabled a meaningful exchange of information that helped to provide insight into the experience of (in)accessibility in a way that valued disability and the disabled.

This generic qualitative study drew from the principles of a constructivist-based grounded theory in order to explore the experiences of (in)accessibility at university, according to the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s). Grounded theory is defined by Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) as a “systematic, qualitative procedure that researchers use to generate a general explanation (called a *grounded theory*) that explains a process, action, or interaction” (p. 240). As part of this process, Creswell (2008) noted that “grounded theorists proceed through systematic procedures of collecting data, identifying categories (used

synonymously with themes), connecting these categories, and forming a theory that explains the process” (p. 432). The theory that emerges from the research is a generalized abstraction derived from specific data; in this capacity the theory emerges “at a broad conceptual level” (Creswell, 2008, p. 432), and is not necessarily a theory per se (Charmaz, 2004, 2011), but an explanation of the given problem derived from and supported by the collective accounts of the participants (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). According to Charmaz (2004), “most grounded theory researchers have aimed to develop rich conceptual analyses of lived experiences and social worlds instead of intending to create substantive or formal theory” (p. 517). To ground emerging explanations in the participants’ lived experiences, researchers typically collect data from participants using interviews and analyze the data at multiple points in time using a series of coding procedures (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Once several iterations of coding have occurred, categories emerge from the data, and relationships among categories serve to generate a grounded theory that explains the process of interest.

This study is informed by constructivist-based grounded theory, and is influenced by the contemporary constructivist model (see Charmaz 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). The constructivist approach to grounded theory was developed by Charmaz to cultivate a research approach that served as an intermediary between the tenets of positivism and postmodernism (Creswell, 2008). Under this framework, participants’ views are highly valued by the researcher (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). As an interpretative method of analysis, Charmaz (2004) noted that grounded theory studies “aim to capture the worlds of the people by describing their situations, thoughts, feelings and actions and

by relying on portraying the research participants' lives and voices. Their concerns shape the direction and form of the research" (p. 499). However, under a constructivist approach, the researcher also actively contributes to the research process by shaping data shared by participants into explanatory categories that form the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). To this end, the researcher does not approach the material without influence. Rather she or he approaches the data from a subjective position, whereby the "researcher brings certain questions to the data" in addition to her or his own "values, experiences, and priorities" (Charmaz, as cited in Creswell, 2008, p. 439).

A constructivist paradigm is built upon the notion that there are multiple realities to explore from a subjective perspective, which allows the researcher and participants to develop shared understandings through their interaction (Charmaz, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Consequently a constructivist approach is suited to the application of social justice issues because it fosters collaboration between researchers and participants, and utilization of subjectivity to explore particular phenomena. While collaboration is paramount under a constructivist approach, it is also vital to actualizing transformation according to the social justice perspective advocated by Freire (2005). This differs from a traditional grounded theory approach whose origins are tied to blending positivistic principles of objective inquiry with qualitative research (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore research from a constructivist approach is conducted from the inside because findings emerge from the shared accounts of participants and researchers, instead of being derived solely from the outside observations of those conducting the study (Charmaz, 2004, 2011).

While other approaches are beneficial to some areas of research, the use of a generic qualitative study informed by the principles of a constructivist orientation provided an appropriate method of generating rich information around a sensitive topic. Another benefit of a research design influenced by a constructivist-based grounded theory was that it fostered research that “brings critical inquiry to covert processes and invisible structures” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 362) in order to “discover contradictions between rhetoric and realities, ends and means, and goals and outcomes” (p. 362). However, while grounded theory typically focuses on making implicit beliefs and actions explicit with respect to the participants’ lives (Charmaz, 2011), this principle was modified somewhat for the purposes of this study. Meaning was derived from the participants’ experiences to make apparent actions and aspects related to (in)accessibility that may be obvious to some but overlooked by others within the university (see Titchkosky, 2011).

Drawing on grounded theory can be rationalized from an ethical standpoint, but this approach is also beneficial from a pragmatic perspective because the use of grounded theory can facilitate researchers to “generate a theory when the current existing theories do not address the problem or participants of interest” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, pp. 240-241). Presently there is a paucity of research that has focused exclusively on the experiences of graduate students with disabilities (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Jacklin, 2011; NEADS, 2014) and this research gap is confounded further because critical inquiry of matters related to disability and access in the university environment constitute “an under-theorized phenomenon that has remained relatively untouched” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. xii). Given these research gaps and the under-theorization of disability and access in

university, there does not seem to be a strong theoretical framework in place regarding the experiences of (in)accessibility in the university based on the perspectives of graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability. This, in turn, reaffirms the use of a generic qualitative study informed by the principles of grounded theory. Overall, conducting a study informed by the principles of a constructivist-based grounded theory appears favorable because this approach can allow me to embrace the complexity of the phenomenon and remain sensitive to the participants, while potentially proposing a theoretical observation from the data (see Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Epistemological Orientation

The purpose of this study is to recognize how (in)accessibility is experienced according to the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). In turn, this study is rooted epistemologically in a transformative discourse, since it may offer potential for disabled students to maintain (or regain) a sense of empowerment by expressing their experiences with and reflections on (in)accessibility at university. As such, inspiration for this thesis borrowed from both Freirian-inspired social justice and Disability Studies-based discourses. Both discourses run parallel in their belief that the experience of being different from the dominant societal group can be used to inform one's consciousness, and in turn, foster change by challenging the oppressive structures in society.

The potential power of expressing one's lived experience authentically and critically is a key component of transformation (Freire, 2005). Transformation is born from a synergy of intellectual endeavors, such as shared dialogue, conscious critical

reflection, and inspired action. Such practices are led by the oppressed after they have gained a critical understanding of their potentially problematic situation, and gain momentum by inspiring similar conscious realizations in the minds of their oppressors (Freire, 2005). Similarly, given that disability and the disabled are at times positioned as out on the margins within university (see Linton, 1998; Titchkosky, 2011), it is frequently noted within Disability Studies literature that meaningful change often results when it is directed from the inside out (Charlton as cited in Gabel, 2005; Christians, 2011; Linton, 1998). For example, Linton (1998) adopted the practice of centring disability in her work: “disabled is centred, and nondisabled is placed in the peripheral position in order to look at the world from the inside out, to expose the perspective and expertise that is silenced” (p. 13). In addition, Titchkosky (2009) notes that, “while the margins are spaces of oppression, they are also spaces of resistance” (p. 8). Therefore, by centering disability within a social model framework, I can produce research in a manner that appreciates that disabled students possess insider knowledge about experiences with disability that can provide critical awareness about experiences related to disability within academia.

Based on the aforementioned literature, the use of an epistemology that purposefully (re)positions marginalized perspectives from the periphery to the centre of the research is premised upon countering traditional approaches that can privilege and perpetuate ableism and normalcy (see Linton, 1998; Titchkosky, 2009). Through this approach, ownership of the descriptions of what it is like to be disabled or to have a disability(s) is purposely vested in those individuals. By using a social model approach to draw directly on the perspectives of a population that has historically been prevented from experiencing full participation and from expressing its potential limitations, this

approach is intended to counter potential domination and oppression that could otherwise result from individualizing disability (see Linton, 1998; Titchkosky, 2009). This is important since dominant notions of normalcy can exist within the research culture and can consequently devalue disability and marginalize the disabled (see Gabel, 2005; Linton, 1998; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

A Freirian-based epistemology identifies the need for the oppressed to counter the problematic facets—such as the mechanisms, structures, and ideologies—present within the dominant culture (Freire, 2005). Freire (2005) stressed the importance of opposing oppressive elements of society and achieving liberation by engaging in critical thinking about social, political, and economic problems based on personal experience. For example, he noted that change can result from thinking critically about potential problems, because these processes foster the development of a *critical consciousness* (Freire, 2005, pp. 35-36), *conscientização* (Freire, 2005, pp. 35-36), or *conscientization* (Freire, as cited in Christians, 2011, p. 74). However, unlike other forms of inquiry that render the “victims of injustice” (Freire, 2005, p. 36) subject to oppression and self-doubt, *conscientização* enables the oppressed individuals to participate as “responsible Subjects” (p. 36) in creating change through reflective exploration and “self-affirmation” (p. 36). As a result, this qualitative study was able to move beyond the mere exchange of words and entered the realm of transformative dialogue by embracing reflection and action (see Freire, 2005).

While critical consciousness is rooted in Freirian discourse as noted above, Disability Studies scholars promote *critical reflection* (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009, p. 9) or a *Freirian form of praxis* (Gabel, 2005, p. 9) to gain awareness. In particular, Gabel

(2005) defined the use of a Freirian form of praxis in education as a “conscious effort at social change that brings about equity, social justice, and full participation in society where the work toward social change is led by those who are, themselves, oppressed” (p. 9). Furthermore, she noted that it is also an important feature of social justice-inspired research. Under this framework, the social model can be used as a device to question normative structures in society, in order to promote critical awareness and to challenge how disability is conceived and treated in educational environments (see Gabel, 2005; Linton, 1998; Michalko, 2008; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

Overall, Freirian and Disability Studies discourses offer ideological perspectives that appear to be in alignment. Both promote the exploration of problems as instruments of critical change. Furthermore, both orientations stress the importance of dialogue and collaboration to address issues in society (see Freire 2006; Gabel, 2005; Mertens et al., 2011). As such, in this study I embrace the notion that dialogical engagement is an instrument for change. This once again reaffirms the value this study placed on qualitative methods. Through this practice of critical reflection, it may be possible to identify past and present issues associated with (in)accessibility, and to identify how accessibility can continue to be improved upon in the future. Otherwise, as long as diverse dialogues are silenced, the status quo will likely be perpetuated and the oppressed will remain at risk of being dehumanized (Freire, 2005).

Site and Participant Selection

In order for qualitative research to be meaningful, it must provide a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). To achieve this end, purposeful sampling must

occur, whereby “researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2008, p. 214). This study looked at the experiences with (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one medium-sized university in Southern Ontario. Self-identification served as the key determinant of disability because Linton (1998) noted that it was all that was necessary to gain membership into the disability community. Furthermore, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) also used self-identification as a selection strategy, in part, because this approach allows researchers “to refrain from imposing the label of ‘disabled’ (as would have been imposed by, for example, seeking individuals who satisfied particular medical or diagnostic criteria)” (p. 41).

In addition to being underrepresented in the literature, graduate students were selected over other members of the population (e.g., undergraduates) because they have typically spent a significant amount of time within the university setting in order to advance to the master’s and doctoral level. Since graduate students had studied extensively within this type of postsecondary educational environment to (attempt to) acquire multiple degrees, it was believed that these students might have more experiences from which to draw on to provide insight into the phenomenon of study. Furthermore, these graduate students may have faced unique challenges (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008) that have yet to be identified in the literature. In turn, by engaging in dialogue with graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s), heightened awareness about (in)accessibility in university might be fostered with respect to past, present, and future practices.

Graduate students were selected on the basis of their willingness to disclose their disability and to share their experiences related to (in)accessibility at university. Participants were also strategically selected using a broad definition of disability in order to encompass various perspectives across the sample unified by having a disability. (See Titchkosky and Michalko (2009) for an explanation as to why exact definitions of disability are often avoided in Disability Studies literature.) While the sample could be considered homogeneous because the students all had disabilities and were studying at the graduate level (see Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), such an approach potentially fails to consider that disability is a diverse, multifaceted, and idiosyncratic phenomenon (see Olkin, 2002a, 2002b, 2010; Rose, 2010). Maximal variation sampling, on the other hand, works with complexity by embracing multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). In particular, maximal variation sampling is defined as “a purposeful sampling strategy in which the research samples cases or individuals differ on some characteristic or trait” (Creswell, 2008, p. 214). As a result, the sampling method employed in this study represented a fusion of homogeneous and maximal variation sampling methods because the participants were united such that they were all graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s), but diverse in terms of their disabilities. This approach was designed to respect the complexity of disability, and it was hoped that this method would capture the wholeness of being disabled in university while recognizing the diversity inherent in the manifestation and experience of disability. This method serves to recognize that “even though ‘collective life’ may be expressed in heterogeneous forms, it is still homogeneous

insofar as one version of being the same is that we are all members of a variety of collectives” (Michalko, 2008, p. 413).

Once the study gained clearance from the university’s Research Ethics Board (REB) (File Number: 14-077), it was imperative to find ways to attract a diverse range of graduate students with disabilities. This was important given that different types of disabilities can manifest in various ways. Furthermore, graduate students may also have different attitudes towards disclosure given that Farrar (2006) and Jacklin (2011) both report that the decision to disclose often becomes more complicated in graduate schools. Therefore some may choose to disclose their disability and seek accommodations while others do not. To recognize this tendency towards differential disability disclosure, participants were recruited from various locations across the university that dealt with graduate students in general (e.g., an association representing graduate students and a graduate department).

With respect to site selection, access to information-rich participants—or those who can provide significant insight into a particular topic of exploration (Patton as cited in Creswell, 2008)—was believed to be securable at a mid-sized university. The site was chosen because it offered a wide range of graduate programs and had a fairly robust graduate student population. As a result, given the volume of students studying at the master’s and doctoral level, it was hoped that there would be a sufficient number of students who would be willing to self-identify and participate in the study.

Although the size of the institution potentially helped secure a greater number of participants, it also made identifying and contacting this specific population challenging given privacy issues and sensitivities surrounding disability. To overcome this obstacle,

access to participants was obtained by establishing connections with *gatekeepers* (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Gatekeepers were individuals with connections to the site that could identify and grant access to particular spaces of interest as well as methods of contacting potential participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, as cited in Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Representatives from an association representing graduate students and a graduate department were identified as gatekeepers with access to various forms of electronic communication (e.g., mass email distribution lists, websites, and electronic newsletters) to attract potential participants. To facilitate recruitment for this study, two gatekeepers agreed to share letters of invitation through electronic forms of communication with graduate students in their professional circles.

Once potential participants learned of the study through letters of invitation, those who were interested and qualified to participate in the study were instructed to send me an email. In response to their interest, general introductory emails were sent to answer any questions that may have been raised and to supply more information about the study to ensure informed consent could be obtained. Within the general introduction stage, potential participants were provided with copies of the interview questions and the informed consent form to review before the interview. Participants were informed of the central purpose of the study. They were also told that the results could be published to communicate findings about the phenomenon and that the information would be used to satisfy part of my graduate degree requirements. Furthermore, given that the findings could be shared, the participants were also informed that their insights and recommendations could extend benefit to future generations of students with disabilities. Participants were also informed of their rights, which included the right to withdraw from

the study at any time without penalty, the right to withhold information they did not want to share, and the right to confidentiality and privacy. Participants were also made aware of the expected time commitments, general interview procedures, and various opportunities to review, reflect upon, and revise data collected from their interviews.

Once participants agreed to the terms and conditions of the study, they were asked to send an email indicating a preferred and an alternative time and date to conduct an interview. After a mutually agreeable time and location was established, a confirmation email was sent to indicate the meeting time and location. The interview room was a safe, quiet, and accessible location near an accessible washroom and elevator, where information could be exchanged securely.

Data Collection and Recording

Four graduate students expressed interest in the study; however, only three chose to participate in interviews. Although the sample size was small, there was no attrition. All three of the participants were actively involved in all of the stages of data collection (e.g., initial interviews, follow-up interviews, member checks). It was considered reasonable that only a small number of participants took part because, given that the purpose of this qualitative research study was to obtain in-depth information, this ensured the research topic could be explored in detail (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). As a result, the study was not designed to produce generalizable findings.

Data were collected primarily through one-on-one interviews. Initial interviews occurred in December 2014, and lasted approximately an hour and a half to two hours. Follow-up interviews occurred near the end of January 2015, and generally lasted about an hour. Interviews were considered an appropriate form of data collection for this

qualitative study because they are typically the primary method used within this design (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Although interviews were designed to occur in a one-to-one format, participants were informed that personal support workers (e.g., a sign language interpreter) were welcome to attend should their presence be requested. The intention of this was to ensure the study was accessible to various students with a range of communication preferences. However, none of the participants requested the presence of a third party at the interview.

Interview questions were provided to participants in advance to allow extra time to reflect and formulate responses. Given that this study centered on experiences with (in)accessibility, proactive steps were also taken to ensure that professional supports were in place for participants because participants could become distressed from recollecting potentially negative experiences. As a result, participants were provided information about free counseling services, located both on as well as off campus, prior to the start of each interview. Counseling referral handouts were provided to every participant by email when interview dates were confirmed and by paper when interviews were conducted. Referral information was provided to all of the participants to ensure that no one had to request this information and to allow interested parties to obtain services at their own convenience and discretion, if necessary.

Before any research data were gathered, participants were provided with a complementary bottle of water and \$20 remuneration at the start of every interview (e.g., initial and follow-up sessions). This money was offered to compensate for travel and parking expenses and to recognize time that was shared. After funding was distributed, the participants and I reviewed the purpose of the study, the ethical rights of the

participant, the responsibilities I had as researcher, and the documents related to obtaining informed consent. Participants were also informed of the benefits and risks associated with the study, and informed consent was obtained only after they agreed to participate in the study based upon these terms and conditions. A recordable form of consent (e.g., a signature, a voice recording, et cetera) was obtained to demonstrate their understanding and willingness to participate. Interviews occurred only after informed consent was obtained.

Initial interviews adhered to a semi-structured interview format by asking the same set of broad, open-ended, research questions—a process characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) (see Appendix A to view the Semi-Structured Initial Interview Protocol). This approach ensured that questions posed to participants addressed the same topic of study, while simultaneously allowing for flexibility based on how participants articulated responses. In addition, this approach also made it so that participants could share their experiences without being influenced by research or the researcher (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). If further details or clarification was required, probing questions were used to obtain further information from participants (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). The questions posed were designed to move from the general to the specific.

Once general introductions were exchanged, straightforward introductory questions were asked to allow the participants to feel at ease with sharing information. Background questions focused on information related to the participant's past and present academic studies (e.g., programs of study, use of services or accommodations, time to completion requirements, funding) and the nature of their disability. The purpose of these

preliminary questions was to establish rapport with the participants and to ease the transition into answering research questions (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

As previously discussed, this research adheres to a social model of disability. By framing questions around how access is experienced (or not) within the university environment, I attempt to recognize that “access is a form of perception and thus a space of questions” (p. 16). As a result, research questions are structured around experiences of (in)accessibility as they pertain to factors within the social environment that is the university. Consequently, the main interview questions were designed to generate dialogue that fostered understanding about the experience of (in)accessibility from the perspective of three graduate students, from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). To achieve this, I first asked the participants to define the phenomenon in their own words. In particular, they were asked, “What does the term, accessibility, mean to you in a university setting?” Once a working definition of accessibility was established, three sets of subquestions were used to expand understanding of the phenomenon. Subquestions were organized around subcategories, such as (a) experiences related to accessibility, (b) experiences related to inaccessibility, and (c) insights related to future recommendations. In particular, the subquestions used were:

1. Based on your experiences while studying at university, what factors may have enabled access for you as a disabled student (with a disability)? Can you provide any examples based on your experiences? (Was there anything you found to be particularly supportive or accommodating?)

2. Based on your experiences while studying at university, what factors may have limited access for you as a disabled student (with a disability)? Can you provide any examples based on your experiences? (Was there anything you found to be particularly obstructive, unsupportive, or unaccommodating?)
3. Based on your experiences, what key insight or advice would you give the university to enhance the experience of access for disabled students (with disabilities)?

When appropriate, the following supplementary questions were also used to solicit a deeper understanding of the phenomenon:

- Have your experiences with access been shaped by _____ (blank) _____? If so, how? Are there any moments that stand out in particular?
 - The physical structure
 - Professors
 - Administrative Staff
 - Students/Peers
 - Policies
 - Services
 - You, personally
- Has anything else affected your experience with accessibility? If so, can you explain what this was and how it shaped your experience with accessibility?
- Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer incoming disabled students (with disabilities) to enhance their experience with access at university?

All of the questions outlined above were used to generate research that could deconstruct the climate in which (in)accessibility manifests, and also address how accessibility might be improved upon in the future.

I used probing questions during the interview to obtain clarification when necessary. Participants were encouraged to reflect on any critical incidents that informed their experiences in university. The notion of time was considered to be flexible, therefore experiences that occurred throughout their entire university education (e.g., undergraduate studies and graduate studies) were not discounted. Personal stories were also welcomed during the interviews because they provided rich information about the experiences participants had had.

I did not take notes during interviews because Creswell (2008) stressed that good listening is essential to a successful interview. Instead, conversations with participants were recorded during interviews using an audiotape, and I later transcribed these recordings verbatim to create electronic text documents. To ensure transcripts were recorded with precision, they were created as soon as possible within two weeks of the interview. According to Charmaz (2004, 2011), this ensures that a higher level of familiarity can be maintained by the researcher with the data. These transcripts subsequently formed the body of textual data that served as the main vehicle of analysis. To make these (and future) documents accessible, text was presented using 14-point font as recommended by the participants.

The actual names of participants were not used in this study (e.g. transcripts, memos, reported findings, et cetera). Initially pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. However, they were eventually replaced with generic descriptors (e.g.,

Participant1, Participant2, Participant3) because concern was raised that, given the low number of participants as well as the idiosyncratic ways in which disability and (in)accessibility were experienced, pseudonyms revealed information (e.g., gender) that could potentially allow for identities to be discerned by others who are familiar with the participants or reported experiences. (Note: I originally asked participants to select their own pseudonyms, but I did not think, at that time, to stress the importance of using a gender-neutral name to mitigate this issue.) As a result, generic descriptors were used in an attempt to further protect participant confidentiality. However, given that there were only three participants, it was easy for me to remember associations between pseudonyms, generic descriptors, and participants, without written reminders that could otherwise compromise confidentiality. Additionally, all electronic de-identified data files were password protected and created on a private password-protected computer to which only I had access.

Member checks were conducted with the participants to confirm or correct collected data. Once I created the interview transcripts, private emails were sent to each participant with a password-protected copy in case they wanted to review the texts. The purpose of this email was to allow participants to confirm, correct, and augment preliminary data collected from the initial interview. Participants were invited to review their files electronically by email and orally by (follow-up) interview. Instructions were provided within the email informing participants to send a response that included a copy of their revised electronic transcript as an attachment, or a preferred and alternative date and time to conduct a follow-up interview should they wish to perform a member check. All three students volunteered to take part in member checks; all arranged follow-up

interviews and two also supplied electronic revisions. Information shared through the private emails and the follow-up interviews were used to revise data—subject to the participants’ requests—and to further enhance data analysis, if applicable.

All of the participants chose to participate in the follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews also allowed me to obtain clarification of certain material when necessary. Similar steps were followed, using the same approach described above for initial interviews, to confirm follow-up interview dates and conduct follow-up interviews (including obtaining informed consent). However, unlike initial interviews, follow-up interviews were composed for general member check questions and specific clarification questions (see Appendix B to view the Semi-Structured Follow-Up Interview Protocol). General member check questions were typically closed in nature (e.g., designed to elicit yes or no answers) and were the same for each participant. For instance, all of the participants were asked (a) whether they had had a chance to review their transcript, (b) whether they felt they were represented accurately in their transcript, (c) whether they wanted anything to be added to their transcript, and (d) whether there was anything in their transcript that they wanted to have changed or removed. A few minor revisions were made to add and clarify content, but all of the participants answered “yes” to question (b) listed above to indicate that they were accurately represented in their transcripts.

The remaining clarification questions were intended to address questions I had as a researcher to ensure accuracy of the transcripts as well as my interpretation of the material. Clarification questions, specific to each individual’s transcript, were asked, when it appeared necessary. Questions within this section typically featured excerpts of text from the individual’s transcript and specific questions were asked, at times, to clarify

the content, context, or meaning, associated with the given passage. (Note: Clarification questions are omitted from Appendix B to maintain confidentiality because some of the clarification questions contained specific and potentially identifying information.)

Two participants requested the opportunity to review follow-up transcripts via email to confirm their accuracy because both had provided extensive amounts of supplementary material at their follow-up interviews. Consequently, two participants performed electronic-based member checks of their follow-up interview transcripts. As a result, the member check procedures for the initial interviews outlined above were followed to accommodate these requests once the follow-up transcripts were created. However, unlike prior member check procedures, these revisions only occurred electronically as per the participants' requests. Based on feedback received from the second round of member checks, minor revisions were made to the follow-up interview transcripts.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection process by conducting interviews in a private and safe space, using generic and gender-neutral descriptors to refer to participants within the study, using passwords to protect transcripts and data files stored on a password-protected computer, and ensuring that only I listened to and transcribed recorded interviews (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Data Analysis

Given that this generic qualitative study was informed by the principles of constructivist-based grounded theory, data analysis occurred continuously throughout the data collection process (see Charmaz 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). As a result,

understanding derived from early stages of research actively shaped subsequent decisions and actions. Cyclical data analysis procedures enabled me to engage in the process of constant comparison, which enables a significant but generalized concept to be derived from specific data collected from the participants. In particular, the proposed theory (or model) evolved from transforming raw data into codes, codes into categories, and categories into a theory (or theoretical model) (see Charmaz 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). Because of this necessary grounding, the experiences of participants were of utmost importance and reporting measures that could constrain the communication of findings were avoided (Creswell, 2008). As a result, under a constructivist approach, the use of *in vivo codes*—that is, titles that identify particular categories of data using the same words employed by the participants—are favored (Charmaz 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008) whenever possible over other measures that can distance the participant from the process, such as terminology and jargon (Creswell, 2008).

Before interviews were conducted, data analysis began with a process of critical reflection. I engaged in reflexive practices, such as reflexive journaling, in order to examine my own experiences with (in)accessibility at university and my assumptions of literature reviewed for the study. (For more information about reflexive journaling, see Reflexive Practices below.) While these initial impressions were used to develop the general interview questions, further reflection upon the questions ensured that they were framed in a general, open-ended, and non-leading manner. This information was not used to generate coding categories before data were collected from participants, since this would prevent significance from being obtained by grounding the theory in the data (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Charmaz as cited in Creswell, 2008). Instead, after interviews

were conducted, memos served as the subsequent medium I could use to reflect on the data and to refine code and category development at various stages throughout the research process.

Memos were used to analyze research using procedures influenced by constructivist-based grounded theory practices identified by Charmaz (2004) and Creswell (2008). In particular, memo writing is often used to record the impressions of the researcher, to compare and reflect on material and analytic developments that emerge from the data, and to make transparent the logic underpinning research decisions (Charmaz, 2004; Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Furthermore, memo writing procedures are often used throughout the data collection and analysis process because they reportedly facilitate researchers with sorting data and recording insights, without overwhelming them with the amount of information collected. For the purposes of this study, memo writing was used at multiple points throughout the research process to record insights from conducting interviews, creating transcripts, and conducting data analysis (e.g., coding data and developing categories). Written memos were eventually, as Charmaz (2004) recommended, expanded to include excerpts of textual data from transcripts that were clustered around in vivo codes then refined into a draft to present the research findings.

Initial coding began as I reflected on the data and recorded impressions within memos over four stages of the research process: the first, immediately following each interview; the second, immediately following the transcription process; the third, following email exchanges with participants regarding the confirmation, modification, and enhancement of transcripts; and the final stage, following the (re)reading of compiled

transcripts. During the first three phases, key concepts that emerged from the data were recorded as initial impressions in a free-writing format. These central ideas and general trends informed subsequent stages of transcription coding. Coding procedures were used to analyze data from both the initial and the follow-up interviews.

Once general findings were recorded in a free-writing style, line-by-line coding procedures similar to those described by Charmaz (2004, 2011) were used to systematically highlight key concepts from transcripts. As the name suggests, transcript material was reviewed and analyzed, line-by-line, for emerging concepts. To facilitate this process, line-by-line coding files were created using word processing software for each individual transcript. These files consisted of a T-chart, similar to those used by Charmaz, where one side of the page was filled with the participant's transcript and the other side was left blank to record notes specific to each line of text. This allowed me to review the individual transcripts and simultaneously record emerging concepts using the participants' words—a process that enhances the employment of in vivo codes (Charmaz, 2004, 2011). To enhance privacy, these files were also password protected, stored on a private password-protected computer, and used generic descriptors in place of participant names.

After data were collected and coded individually, emerging codes were compared across the data sets and these impressions were recorded as memos. Key concepts that appeared within one transcript were, in turn, used to further interrogate data from the other textual renderings from interviews to highlight trends and interrelationships. However, as previously discussed, memoing also occurred at various points over the course of the study, which enabled me to revisit and conduct data analysis with a new

frame of reference. This continual return to reflect on the data and to develop codes and categories functioned as the method of constant comparison employed in the study. Therefore, instead of soliciting new participants, transcripts served as the body of text that was repeatedly interrogated to fill out categories. These procedures were intended to reflect the constant comparative method, which is used by grounded theorists to analyze their data at the same time data are collected (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008). The constant comparative procedure was modified so as to focus solely on information derived from transcripts without changing the semi-structured interview guide between participants. Although researchers using the constant comparative method would typically modify interview questions after each interview (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008), this approach was not followed due to the potential for complications with obtaining ethics clearance as previously discussed.

Data analysis stopped when new information and insights no longer contributed to the development of a theory; a juncture in research often referred to as the point of saturation (Creswell, 2008). Therefore, once new insight could no longer be gained from reflecting on the collected material, data analysis transitioned into category development. Core categories were derived using focused coding procedures. At this stage, the data had been reviewed several times and several patterns had been recorded in the memos and described using in vivo codes. Consequently, whenever possible, all code and category titles were taken verbatim from the interviews with participants; otherwise, I created codes and categories that unified the verbatim accounts of participants. Once I reflected on this material, individual categories were formed by grouping common codes together strategically to highlight interrelationships and develop a theory. Categories were formed

on the basis of frequency, relevancy, logical connections, and broad explanatory power of a given group of codes.

After categories were formed, they were used to establish a theory that described the process of how (in)accessibility is experienced in university according to three graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s). Although traditional grounded theorists often favor the presentation of a theory using a visual model (Creswell, 2008), this theory was primarily conveyed through a “collective analytic story” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 364). According to Creswell (2008), when research is conducted using a constructivist orientation, verbal descriptions often take precedence over diagrams and conceptual maps to ensure that findings are communicated clearly. Furthermore, although conceptual analysis often takes precedence within designs influenced by grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008), I deviated slightly from this approach because I primarily presented data in the form of detailed, literal, descriptions, so that key insights from the participants would not be lost. Thus, the study took on a generic qualitative format.

Although literature was reviewed at the beginning of this study, data were not placed within predetermined categories found in the literature. Under a constructivist design, it was important to avoid forming categories before data were collected from participants (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Charmaz as cited in Creswell, 2008). Initially, literature was reviewed and reflected on in comparison to my personal experiences as a disabled graduate student in order to determine the suitability of the research topic and research questions. Research was also reviewed following data collected in the final stages of the study to provide theoretical support to further substantiate the findings.

Reflexive Practices

Although the use of qualitative methods informed by the principles of grounded theory focus on sharing understanding based on the voices of the participants, in my research, data were also shaped by my actions as a researcher (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in terms of how questions were framed and answers were interpreted (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). In this respect, participants and researchers are co-constructors in the research process (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, although this study focused on the perspectives of graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s), my own beliefs and experiences with disability could not help but be reflected in the study. As a student researcher, I cannot fully separate my role as a researcher from that of a student. Nor can I extricate myself from my experiences with my disability; this would constitute a “disembodied concept of identity” according to Sherry (2008, p. 13). To this end, there is a certain degree to which I speak from the inside-out; that is, from my perspective as an insider that is framed according to my experience as a disabled person (see Linton, 1998). Due to this mix of personal and professional involvement within constructivist-based grounded theory, researchers are encouraged to engage in reflexive practices (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012). To address this, I engaged in reflexive practices, such as reflective journaling and a critical peer review process.

Reflexive Journaling

While the insights I have gained from having a disability inform my research practices, and have fostered my interest in social justice issues in higher education, they nevertheless need to be accounted for in order to produce acceptable academic research.

In order to capture how my own beliefs may shape my perspectives about the research, Creswell (2008) recommends being a reflexive practitioner. Reflexivity, in particular, occurs when “researchers reflect on their own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into their research” (Creswell, 2008, p. 58). Therefore as a reflexive practitioner, I have utilized the recommended practice of reflexivity by critically examining how my own experiences may have influenced the findings, and by communicating this information openly within the study (Creswell, 2008). A reflexive journal was used to capture various insights I made between my personal connections and the emerging data. This procedure established my credibility as a researcher because it enabled me to become grounded in the participant community (Mertens et al., 2011) without undermining the credibility of the study, in that qualitative research is recognized as being inherently biased towards the views of the researcher (Charmaz, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Critical Peer Review

A critical peer was used for the purpose of auditing the data analysis. The critical peer has a disability, holds a master’s degree, and has an academic and a professional background in disability-related issues in postsecondary education. Therefore, given these factors, [s]he appeared well-suited on a number of fronts to evaluate the study. The critical peer only received access to de-identified and password protected data by email after returning a signed confidentiality agreement indicating [s]he would adhere to the expressed terms and conditions within the document (e.g., agree to keep the data confidential and to destroy all copies of related information once it was returned to me). To further protect data, passwords were separately supplied by phone. The critical peer

had access to copies of all of the transcripts from initial and follow-up interviews, as well as copies of the research questions, the memos, and the Chapter Four draft. After [s]he reviewed the documents, [s]he indicated approval of the data analysis procedures and the presentation of research.

Methodological Assumptions

This study was premised upon the basic assumption that participants had experienced the phenomenon and would be willing share this information. During the completion of this study, it was assumed that the individuals who volunteered to participate did so with a willingness to be open and honest about their experiences with (in)accessibility in university. Assumptions were made that participants honestly depicted their experiences and that I also portrayed and interpreted them accurately. Furthermore because the individuals who chose to participate did so with a willingness to disclose their disability and with awareness that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study, the pressure of passing was assumed to be minimized. Lastly, it was assumed that participants had positive intentions for wanting to share their experiences with (in)accessibility in university.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

In this study, I will explore the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. Given the scope of this study, the results are not necessarily generalizable. Furthermore, as Grundy and McGinn (2008) have suggested, “these experiences do not reflect the experiences of all students with disabilities” (para. 2). Similarly, this study is not intended to represent the

experiences of all graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). Furthermore, this study is not intended to relate to all of the facets associated with accessible and inaccessible experiences in university. Therefore the results may or may not relate to disabled students at the undergraduate level or graduate level at the current university research site. In addition, the results of this study may or may not reflect the experiences of individuals, with (dis)similar disabilities, at other institutions. However, these limitations were considered acceptable given that qualitative research is not designed to produce generalizable findings, but rather to explore a particular issue in great detail (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). As a result, the study was intended to serve as an exploratory account designed to generate understanding about an underdeveloped area of research. Consequently, this study may serve as a launching point and supportive device for future work.

Several potential limitations could have affected the study. For example, although proactive steps were taken to consciously make this study accessible, it is possible that certain (in)accessibility features were overlooked. The study may have also been limited by social pressures to pass (see Linton, 1998). Although a central participant selection requirement was that graduate students were willing to identify as disabled or as having a disability(s), some graduate students do not feel comfortable identifying as disabled or as having a disability(s) in the graduate school environment (Farrar, 2006; Jacklin, 2011). As a result, this may have limited the number of people willing to participate ($n = 3$). To offset potential fears related to disability disclosure, potential participants were informed of the steps the researcher would take to protect their right to confidentiality (e.g., password protection of data files on a private computer, audiotapes being listened to and

transcribed by the researcher only, and not identifying individuals by name). Despite these attempts, students might not have wanted to participate in the study because it required self-disclosure. In addition, given the sensitivities that can surround disability, there may have been some experiences that participants did not want to relive and share. However, given that I am a novice researcher, the limited scope of the study was beneficial such that it made the study more manageable for me.

Participation may have also been affected by the timing of the initial data collection. Data were collected between December 2014, and January 2015. Given that this timeframe coincided with the end of the fall academic term, potential participants may not have had the availability or energy to participate in the study due to academic duties (e.g., writing papers, taking exams, et cetera) or work responsibilities (e.g., research assistantship, teaching assistantship). As a result, the timing of data collection may have been a limiting factor that dissuaded some individuals from participating.

Establishing Credibility

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), “terms like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 13) and are important to researchers who draw upon constructivist-based grounded theory principles to ensure quality work. Therefore to ensure that the results of this particular generic qualitative study are trustworthy, attempts were made to make the research credible, dependable, and confirmable (Creswell, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hays & Singh, 2012). These characteristics of trustworthy research were demonstrated within this study through the

use of member checking, reflexive practices, and grounding results in the data (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Member checks were conducted by sending participants copies of their interview transcripts via email. The purpose of this email was to allow participants to confirm or correct preliminary data collection by reviewing transcripts, confirming accuracy of the transcripts, and providing clarification where necessary (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore member checking provided participants with the opportunity to review and verify the data; to remove, revise, or expand upon any statements previously made; and to reflect upon information previously given and provide additional insights to the research. This approach worked to ensure the results were credible and dependable (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Reflexive practices enable researchers to remain actively aware of their particular biases throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2004, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012). These practices were identified as being beneficial for two reasons. One, it provided a means of making research decisions transparent. And two, reflexive practices allowed me to remain critical of how my views affected and were affected by the research.

In order for a study to be confirmable, Hays and Singh (2012) recommended that steps must be taken with respect to the methodology to minimize the potential influence the researcher has on the research. The authors note that this can be achieved when, in addition to remaining reflexive, researchers “‘listen to data’ and report them as directly as possible” (p. 201). The use of a generic qualitative design informed by the principles of grounded theory consequently ensured that the results were confirmable because this

framework is based on the central assumption that findings are to be exclusively grounded in the data. Confirmability resulted, therefore, because findings were derived from the direct accounts of participants, through the use of verbatim transcripts, in vivo codes, and categories that remained as close to the words of the participants as possible

Ethical Considerations

While it is important for researchers to consider the possible ethical implications of their work (Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), investigators need to be especially sensitive when research centres on populations that have been historically marginalized (Hays & Singh, 2012). As previously mentioned, the disability community constitutes one such group. Therefore, I attended to the ways in which research had previously affected this community prior to the selection of a research design in order to ensure that the use of the chosen methodology (e.g., a generic qualitative approach informed by a constructivist-based grounded theory design) would not lend to the further marginalization of disabled people.

Other efforts to ensure that this study was conducted in an ethical manner centered on adhering to ethical standards of practice; obtaining ethics clearance from the university's Research Ethics Board (REB); obtaining informed consent from participants; maintaining confidentiality; and conducting interviews in a private, safe, and accessible space for participants to disclose information. Before participants were solicited, the study was reviewed to ensure it was in alignment with ethical standards of practice. I consulted recommendations in the literature that pertained to conducting research, as well as ethical standards of practice recommended by both the university and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). (As per the conditions of having

received a SSHRC award, the agency's ethical standards of practice were consulted during the creation of this study.) After the study was designed using the outlined ethical framework, it was then submitted to the REB. Participants were recruited only after clearance from the REB was obtained (File Number: 14-077).

As previously discussed, informed consent was only obtained from participants once they were made fully aware of the purpose of the study, the tasks and time requirements associated with their participation, their rights associated with taking part in the study (e.g., the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, the right to withhold information they did not feel comfortable sharing, the right to confidentiality and privacy, et cetera). Participants were also made aware of the general interview procedures and the opportunities to review, reflect upon, and revise the data. They were also told how the results would be used to satisfy my degree requirements and how findings could be shared to increase understanding about the phenomenon. (However, participants were informed that no secondary usage of data would occur beyond these publications.) In addition, I also shared with the participants my belief that their participation could shape a deeper understanding of the (in)accessibility of disabled students, which could in turn improve accessibility for future students with disabilities by contributing to positive and productive change within the university. Interviews occurred only after informed consent was obtained and participants signed relevant documentation.

Given the sensitive nature that surrounds disability and disclosure, it was vital to ensure the participants' privacy and confidentiality. As a result, confidentiality and privacy were enhanced by conducting interviews in a private, safe, and accessible space; using generic gender-neutral descriptors to refer to participants throughout the study;

using passwords to protect transcription and data analysis files; storing electronic files on a private, password-protected computer; and ensuring that only I listened to and transcribed the recorded interviews (see Creswell, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2012; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

To establish rapport and make participants feel comfortable, a bottle of water was offered at my expense before the interview. Participants also received \$40 compensation as part of the study. This money was paid in two separate installments; participants received \$20 immediately at the beginning of the initial interview and \$20 at the start of the follow-up interview. This money was offered as compensation to contribute towards travel and parking expenses and to recognize the time that had been volunteered. As per research ethics, this funding was not contingent on their participation and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study any time. Furthermore, these gestures were not considered to undermine or bias the study ethically because neither the amount of money nor the cost of the water was considered excessive.

Given the sensitivities surrounding disability-related research, it was important to recognize that conversations about disability and (in)accessibility could be emotionally charged. Therefore, open-ended interview questions allowed participants to shape their responses in accordance with their personal levels of comfort. While probing questions were asked when clarification was necessary, I stressed at the beginning of the study that participants were not required to answer any questions they were not comfortable with. I also exercised common sense by only asking probing questions when participants appeared as though they were comfortable elaborating. This, alongside establishing rapport, was important because it was considered to help make participants feel secure in

self-directing their responses. Open-ended questions also ensured that participants could communicate their experiences fully. Furthermore, since the views of participants were actively sought, my voice as a researcher was minimized during interviews and served to establish rapport, ask interview questions, and provide evidence of active listening, as much as possible. In this sense, I did not attempt to gain influence over the participants. In addition, by “communicating understanding and care, remaining neutral to the extent needed to maintain study integrity, and being nonjudgmental toward participants and their experiences” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 7), I attempted to demonstrate *empathetic neutrality* (p. 7). This was important because empathetic neutrality reportedly fosters respect for the human element within the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Restatement of the Area of Study

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used within this study. Given the history of unethical research on individuals with disabilities, it was imperative to respect and to remain sensitive towards this particular population and the concept of disability itself. Given these concerns, this generic qualitative study was informed by the principles of a constructivist-based grounded theory. This methodology appeared to align with the fundamental premise of using disability as a “teacher” (Michalko, 2008, p. 414) to elicit information about the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario.

In Chapter Four, I present the results of the study. The reader is provided with a general description of collective participant sample and a definition of accessibility based on the collective views of the participants. Then detailed descriptions are provided to

identify what the experiences of (in)accessibility at university have been according to the perspectives of three graduate students, from one university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). These categories include the places on campus, the people on campus, and the culture of accessibility.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to understand the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. The major research question guiding the study was: What has been the experience of (in)accessibility for three graduate students, from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s)? In addition, three subquestions are used to acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. These questions are:

1. What key factors do graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having enabled their access while studying at university?
2. What key factors do graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having limited their access while studying at university?
3. What recommendations do graduate students (with disabilities) make to enhance the experience of access at university?

Although the study initially focused on the experiences of three graduate students from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, the results of the study included prior experiences the participants had had with (in)accessibility at other universities because they enriched the data and fostered deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Although the participants had a range of disabilities and a diverse array of experiences related to (in)accessibility in graduate education, similarities were also noticeable within the group. As a result, three main categories emerged from the data. In particular, (in)accessibility at

university was related to: (a) the places on campus, (b) the people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness. At times, these central categories overlapped.

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, participants were initially going to be identified using pseudonyms; however, after conducting interviews, it became apparent that a more generic approach should be used. Due to the small sample size ($n = 3$) and the unique conditions under which participant experiences were described, a couple participants became concerned that they could potentially be discerned from the data even if pseudonyms were used. Therefore a more holistic description of the sample was provided and generic descriptors (e.g., Participant1, Participant2, and Participant3) were used to associate participants with highlighted excerpts of text. (This modification had to be made since I did not ask the participants to provide gender-neutral pseudonyms.) Furthermore, some excerpts of text were modified so that identifying names of institutions, departments, people, and associated pronouns were changed in an attempt to maintain confidentiality. These changes are denoted by square brackets followed by an asterisks (e.g., [*]). For example, a specific advisor's name was changed to [my advisor]* and gendered pronouns such as she and he were changed to read as [s]he.* Although the APA (2010) typically advises against the latter practice, it is employed in this study in order to conceal certain information that could be used to potentially discern the participants' identities. It was noted that this was important, in respect to my study given the relatively small sample size ($n = 3$).

In this chapter, I present the results of the study in order to develop understanding about the experience of (in)accessibility at university from the perspective of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). First,

information about the participants is provided. Second, a definition of accessibility is established according to the collective views of the participants. Finally, each of the core categories is presented with particular emphasis on identifying factors that had enabled and limited access for students with disabilities in university, as well as outlining actions that participants believed could enhance access in the future. Based on the experiences of the three graduate students with disabilities, three main categories identified how accessibility was both enhanced and limited. These three categories concerned: (a) the places on campus, (b) the people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness.

The Sample—Information About the Participants

Three graduate students with disabilities chose to participate in this study. Both male and female students were represented in the sample. The study was comprised of research-based graduate students in the Sciences and the Social Sciences who were at various stages of degree completion. Two participants were studying at the master's level while the other was studying at the doctoral level. Two of the participants also had prior graduate education experience from other institutions in Canada (one of which was located in Ontario), and it was during this time that they both acquired their disabilities. During the course of their previous graduate studies, one participant was eventually forced to withdraw from the graduate program while the other participant advanced to the doctoral level. The participants identified as being legally blind, having a concussion/post-concussion syndrome, and having a brain injury. One of the participants also acquired a second disability—a back injury associated with pain and mobility issues—shortly after being accepted into a graduate program at the sample site.

Defining Accessibility

As part of the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to define what accessibility meant to them within a university setting. The three participants focused on aspects of accessibility, such as the notion that it, as well as disability, manifests along a continuum (Participant2); the need to modify elements that have been created in accordance to normative ideals (Participant2); the legal requirements that necessitate accommodation provisions (Participant3); and the need for supportive attitudes and awareness about the importance of accommodations (Participant3; Participant1). These discussions addressed fundamental aspects of accessibility and highlight how “[accessibility] definitely manifests itself in different ways” (Participant2).

Participant2 described how accessibility and disability influence one another and stated that accessibility manifests along a continuum because it “is always a gradient of things.” Given that a range of people fall on this continuum, [s]he alluded that universal design was a preferable way of providing accommodations to meet the needs of the wider community, without alienating certain individuals on more extreme ends of the continuum. In particular, [s]he noted that:

We all have a gradient of what we can see, and because . . . I’m closer to an extreme than (pause)—it tends to be that I get accommodations. But these things always benefit everyone. So don’t make the people that need specific accommodations objects of the accommodation; just have a culture that supports that we’re all in this together, and that this is all part of a process, and that we’re all part of the process. (Participant2)

By evoking the notion of normalcy, Participant2 also illustrated that accommodations are typically designed around what is considered “normal.” In particular, it was noted that:

There are things that we have to do in our everyday lives and usually those things are designed around most people being able to do them. And so, accessibility to me means finding ways for people who don't fit that normal way of doing—and I say normal because it's generally the way that most people can do it—finding ways for other people who can't do it in the usual way can also do it.

(Participant2)

As a result, [s]he strongly connected the definition of accessibility to the ways in which normative assumptions often shape the (educational) environment.

Even though elements in university (and society) are typically created in accordance to so-called normal ways of being (Participant2), Participant3 talked about accessibility in a legal sense. In particular, it was noted that accessibility is about making sure everyone has the right to obtain an education:

Every university student or everyone who wants a university education has equal rights no matter what their disability is or what their frame of mind is. In other words, just because somebody is in a wheelchair, doesn't mean they can't think. Just because I can't get the words out, doesn't mean I can't write a thesis.

(Participant3)

Participant3 not only highlighted how all persons have the legal right to obtain an education, but the latter part of the excerpt also identifies that this right should not be compromised by stereotypical or prejudicial thinking of others. This idea integrates with the views expressed by Participant1 that highlighted the important role supportive

attitudes and awareness play in establishing accessibility. In particular, Participant1 noted that:

To me, accessibility is understanding. I don't want accessibility to be an excuse. I want it to just be an understanding that (pause), well, for me, this is how I operate in this moment of time. This is what I need to reach my potential the most. So (pause), and accessibility is just something that helps me along the way, but it's not an excuse for backing out of something. (Participant1)

Participant1 stressed the importance understanding played in creating an accessible university, having argued by imposition that inaccessibility can result when accommodations are misinterpreted as excuses. Participant1 also reinforced the importance of challenging normative expectations and modifying certain elements within the environment to enable greater accessibility for students with disabilities; a notion previously discussed by Participant2.

Places on Campus

During the data analysis, places on campus emerged as one of the three main categories responsible for creating an (in)accessible campus. Most of the participants identified characteristics of places within the university that were particularly inaccessible to them, but the participants also highlighted ways in which these spaces could be transformed into more accessible environments. The three subthemes that emerged from this category were (a) the need for space, (b) the issues associated with navigating the university terrain, and (c) the need to make presentation space visible.

The Need for Space

Overall, the need for space emerged as a fairly positive theme. Two participants described the benefits of having access to a space on campus that enabled the particular needs of the graduate students to be addressed (Participant1; Participant3). These experiences related to universal characteristics associated with the general university environment as well as specific accommodations associated with particular places on campus, but both types of locations were found to enhance accessibility. In particular, Participant1 talked about how the green space on campus provided a refreshing space to take a break from class and restore cognitive balance:

At [this university]* one of the first things I noticed was just how much they seem to value green space, which is very good for brains and healing brains and whatnot. So I think kind of just that physical attribute of the campus is sort of helpful. Like, you know, when I can go outside during that 20-minute break and go for a walk in the forest, loop back around and feel refreshed. (Participant1)

The participant also noted that this was a welcomed change from [her/his] experience at [her/his] former institution.

Participants also described how it was particularly helpful to have access to a space that enabled them to work with their disabilities. Participant3 noted that [her/his] department had created, within their designated classroom space, an accessible workstation for [her/him] to use that was tailored to suit [her/his] specific needs. In particular, Participant3 noted that:

The equipment is set up here at this campus, so that I can have access to suitable equipment, a workspace for classes, meetings, et cetera. . . . It's a power desk that

can go up and down, so I can stand up and work on my laptop. And they've provided the chair, so I have something like this (pointing to computer chair that can move up and down) to hang on to. (Participant3)

These accommodations enabled the student to participate in their university classroom environment. Participant1 also described the importance of having a space on campus to meet [her/his] needs, but these requirements centered on the importance of having access to a space outside the classroom. In reference to the institution Participant1 previously attended, [s]he identified the importance of having a room on campus where [s]he could decompress and rest. However, [s]he also noted that this once beneficial space eventually became grounds for [her/his] displacement:

There was actually a time where I had asked for a room on campus—where I could just zone out or whatever—and that actually didn't happen. I was given keys to a janitor's closet. It's kind of a funny story, but (laughter), . . . it was essentially a storage room with janitor's equipment in it, and I was like, "I guess maybe this is the place where I get to go hangout and lie under tables when I'm tired and things like that? Um." So I had that place for a month and then all the furniture got removed. Turns out, so yeah, I didn't really have a room like that, but just sort of (pause). Again, it was like this miscommunication between people and things like that at [my former university].* . . . I had left a couple of textbooks in there—like clearly someone had been using this room for that—and then I came in and it was in a pile on the ground. And like, all of the furniture was gone. . . . [I]t was the strangest thing ever. . . . I talked to my supervisor who obviously had no idea of what was going on as per usual. And [s]he* just told me to talk to

the department's admin staff who obviously had no idea of what was going on either. So I just picked up all my stuff and went back home. I gave up on that situation again. (Participant1)

Although Participant1 appreciated the space [s]he was given, [s]he ultimately ended up feeling defeated because the space was made inaccessible without notice and without consideration for [her/his] needs, and alternative accommodations were not provided. This incident also highlights how (mis)communication can shape (in)accessibility of places on campus.

Issues Associated with Navigating the University Terrain

The second theme related to the category, places on campus, concerned issues related to navigating the university terrain. One of the productive features was mobility training. Upon transitioning to university from high school, Participant2 noted that “I had the option of mobility training for [this university].* I did do that; that was good.” [S]he noted that mobility training was useful in the beginning because it helped [her/him] to become acclimated to the new educational environment. In particular, mobility training was a longstanding accommodation that had been offered since elementary school and it consisted of “a tour of like the typical spaces that I would be navigating—so like the hallway, or going from my locker to the classroom, or like the bus stop to the classroom, or stuff like that” (Participant2). This, in turn, enabled Participant2 to “find like strategies from going from one place to the other.” Once Participant2 had these strategies, however, [s]he questioned the usefulness of the accommodation when the spaces remained unchanged. Participant2 also noted that [s]he had become familiar with the environment, given the extensive amount of time [s]he had spent on campus, and this turned out to be

useful in navigating the university terrain: “I’m familiar with [this university].* I’ve been here a number of years, so I know where things are.” However, while the continuity of time on campus played a role in enhancing access, Participant2 also noted that “having said that, you know, there are some areas that always still just come up, but I’m still able to be successful.”

Participant3 also experienced “some areas that . . . c[a]me up” (Participant2) that limited [her/his] ability to access the educational environment. This resulted in reference to three major obstacles: (a) “inaccessible ‘accessible’ parking” and policies, (b) ParaTransit pickup platforms and policies, and (c) an inaccessible graduate student meeting space.

“Inaccessible ‘accessible’ parking” and policies. According to Participant3, “a major issue is the ‘accessible’ parking. It is so *not* accessible” because “the accessible parking spots are too far from the door.” In particular, [s]he noted that “trying to get from the accessible parking to the building where most of my classes are down in the far end of that building—well that simply is not accessible to me.” In contrast, “in most places [off-campus],* the accessible parking is fairly close to the door so that, if I am careful, I can manage.” Furthermore, because proximal parking on campus was metered, it was also reported as being costly and often did not align with the time they needed to be on campus. Alternatively, [s]he noted how one city [s]he was familiar with addressed this type of conflict:

In [a particular city],* if you have an accessible parking sign on your dash, you can park anywhere it’s legal to park and you don’t have to pay at the meter. So even if the accessible parking is full, you can still park as close as possible and

not worry about running out to refill the meter if I end up longer than I expected to be. (Participant3)

However when Participant3, and another disabled peer whom [s]he carpooled with, decided to park in an empty parking lot closer to the building where they needed to go, the parking enforcement officer on campus was not as accommodating. Despite stickers that indicated they had paid for parking and required an accessible space, they were ticketed. Participant3 remarked that:

It is really shocking for me that when the parking lots are empty on a Sunday, the disabled [wo]man* who drives me to class, has been ticketed even though there is a paid receipt on the dash. [S]he's* parked close to the door; it's reserved parking for professors or something, but this is Sunday—*the lot is empty!* And [s]he* got a ticket. And [s]he's* got an accessible sign on [her/his]* car and [s]he* got a ticket! And [my professor]* was fit to be tied. [S]he* said, "Give me that ticket!" . . . [S]he* had told me that once before—when I had said "Am I parking in the wrong place? The parking is just not good."—and [s]he* said, "If you get a ticket, you give it to me!" And [s]he* took this ticket too. (Participant3)

Being ticketed under these circumstances confounded the initial problem of inaccessibility, but the professor responded in a way that enhanced accessibility for the individuals at that time by contesting the policy with parking officials on behalf of [her/his] students.

ParaTransit pickup platforms and policies. Frustrated by navigating the "inaccessible 'accessible' parking" (Participant3) on campus, [s]he explained that "this is why I have to come by ParaTransit." However, this transportation method did not always

guarantee an entirely accessible experience on campus. For instance, [s]he noted that “if ParaTransit is booked up, I am left doing the best I can” (Participant3). Furthermore, since visibility on the platform where [s]he had to catch ParaTransit was limited, due to it being a high-traffic area used by a large volume of students and other vehicles, an additional layer of issues associated with navigating the campus environment emerged:

When they come here to pick me up, I get stressed because they will only pick me up at the front door and I can’t see around the busses. And I can’t run back and forth across the . . . area between the doors itself and the bus[es.] . . . It’s a nice area that’s always packed with students coming and going, but I can’t see ParaTransit, and there are both students and buses in my line of sight. When it’s cold or raining, it’s horrid. I’d like to stand inside the glassed-in area, but I can’t see. (Participant3)

Under these circumstances, policy appears to add an additional inaccessible layer to this situation. While it is not necessarily the university’s sole decision, the ParaTransit policy to pick up students in one centralized location created an additional challenge for Participant3 while it constrained the option of being picked-up in an alternative and possibly more accessible location. However, Participant3 acknowledged that sometimes ParaTransit drivers were able to exercise greater flexibility when dropping [her/him] off, and in turn, they could occasionally transport [her/him] directly in front of [her/his] desired location on campus.

Another policy issue related to ParaTransit identified by Participant3 was that [s]he did not realize that the standard university bus pass provided access to the

disability-based transportation service. As a result, [s]he paid more money than necessary to access the service:

It took me until this fall to realize that the bus pass that I am required to pay for with [the]* university fees is also my bus pass for ParaTransit. I didn't know. So I was paying for ParaTransit on top of paying for a regular bus pass which I believed I was unable to use. See, things like that, if you're not able to keep up, you miss it. (Participant3)

According to Participant3, this lack of knowledge was confounded further by the lack of time [s]he had, due to the constraints of [her/his] disability(s), to find and fully investigate policies related to transportation fees.

Inaccessible graduate student meeting space. While participants spent a significant amount of time trying to get to campus, they also experienced challenges accessing buildings once they arrived. For instance, Participant3 noted that [s]he experienced trouble accessing a building where graduate events took place:

The building [where the association of graduate student holds its meetings]* is almost completely inaccessible. Again there is *some* wheelchair accessibility. There is . . . a curved path which goes around and down to the floor where the meetings are held. It is three or four floors down from the top level where the interior stairs begin—no elevator. . . . But it's downhill all the way or uphill coming back, whichever the case may be, and there's no railing. There's a railing for maybe ten feet out from the lower level. But how difficult is that to travel a hill like that in a wheelchair for a disabled person, who may or may not have disabilities in their hands or arms. The steepness of the hill is a major-problem for

me. If they had a railing *all along it*, I'd have been able to handle it because I would have been able to hold on to the railing. Going out there and going downhill with my legs as they are, I need something to hold on to. I need something to hold onto everywhere. (Participant3)

Therefore, even though there was a provision of an outdoor ramp, [s]he reported that it was physically unsafe to travel; a concern that amplified during winter. Furthermore, not only was the building identified as being inaccessible for certain individuals with physical disabilities, but the conditions of the physical campus environment limited the participation of certain graduate students (with disabilities) because no indoor accommodations were provided to enable access:

The non-disabled have use of an indoor stairwell. The very limited accessibility for disabled persons is all outdoors, and the day that I tried to access the meeting, the pathway was icy. Everything was icy and they were trying to get it all cleared off, but it was nowhere near as clear as it needed to be. . . . So it's still not thought through by those people who have experience with disabilities. (Participant3)

As a result, upon seeking entry into the building, [s]he was literally left in the cold and forced to contend with the added element of winter weather conditions. The passage also illustrates the importance of seeking out and sharing perspectives of students with disabilities in order to shed light on how (in)accessibility is experienced with regards to the construction of the physical environment on campus.

Although Participant2 “always wr[o]te exams in [disability support services],*” [s]he expressed a desire to be able to write exams in the gym with other students.

However [s]he also acknowledged that there were particular limitations associated with navigating the typical exam space on campus. For example, Participant2 noted that,

Navigating exams in the gym probably would have been awkward because it would have been hard to see like where to go. For example, when they post where and when exams are on the board, I look at that and I think that “Ok, well it’s probably good that I didn’t write exams in the gym.” (Participant2)

Consequently, it should not be assumed that students with disabilities wish to uniformly write exams in an alternative location. Although this is a valuable provision for some students, the traditional approach should nevertheless be made more accessible whenever possible.

Building on the latter example, Participant2 also noted how markers used to navigate space within the university terrain are often not as accessible as they could be. [S]he noted that certain signs, such as room numbers and campus maps, are not as large as they could be. Consequently, this made space less visible and, in turn, limited navigation within the campus environment. Participant2 noted that:

There’s always going to be little things. I mean, there are like little things built into everyday life that like most people can see and that I have trouble seeing. Structurally, it’s kind of a barrier. It kind of goes back to the definition of accessibility, you know: most things are made for most people. So like the room things, they’ve got a number—and it’s actually a fair size—and they’ve got Braille. So those two things are good, but how big can the number be on the plaque? But it could be bigger. And so a lot of times people will sacrifice—and by people I mean those making things—they have a balance between aesthetics and

accessibility. So all the room numbers around [this university]* are the same size, because they sort of look good that way, but the function of a room number is to tell you what the room number is. So if it was bigger, would it still be doing its job as a room number, even though maybe it doesn't look as sleek? (Participant2)

As a result, another ability hierarchy manifested since [s]he noted that aesthetics presumably trumped accessibility. Participant2 also noted that this logic held “everywhere” on campus, noting for example, that it was also evident on signs, maps, menus, prices at the bookstore, and citation information pages in textbooks. Although [s]he noted that “there are always space limitations,” [s]he also commented that “there’s room for it to be bigger, but it’s not because, you know, *it just makes sense to have it that size*. (Sarcasm)” (Participant2). Therefore, based on the various issues raised, navigating the ground between accessibility and inaccessibility on campus was challenging.

The Need to Make Presentation Space Visible

The final theme related to the category, places on campus, concerned the importance of making presentation space visible with respect to (a) staged presentations and (b) in-class presentations.

Staged presentations. The presentation of information to navigate campus space created certain structural barriers, but other issues related to staged presentations also made space functionally less visible. Once again, the “balance between aesthetics and accessibility” (Participant2) reasserted itself. Participants who tried to access assemblies and theatre presentations on campus found them inaccessible. In particular, Participant2 noted that the way in which the stage was placed, often forced participants to face a wall

of windows. This, in turn, created contrast that further limited visibility. The participant noted that,

I would never go to an event or activity in that gym because to look in that direction is just like very frustrating. I always think like, “Oh lovely, open lighting. You know, I can’t see anything but it’s lovely.” (Sarcastic Laughter) . . . And I don’t know if other people, like just day-to-day people, realize that? But anyway . . . if the Remembrance Day ceremony was oriented in that the presenters on the stage had to then face the light and the light was behind the audience—*then for me*—that would be better, to the detriment of the people now presenting. So it’s difficult to see it working for everyone. (Participant2)

Interestingly, participants also acknowledged that there are always people who (do not) benefit when decisions are made about accessibility. However, just as Participant3 had suggested earlier, Participant2 also questioned whether nondisabled people recognize how barriers are created and maintained on campus. Participant3 reinforced this notion when [s]he mentioned how [s]he tried to access a theatre performance on campus. While a young staff member had tried to accommodate Participant3’s specific needs, the employee also appeared to be met with resistance from supervisors who did not appear willing to consider the particular accessibility needs of the participant. Instead, priority of the administrators appeared to focus on adherence to rules (for rules’ sake); rules which staff did not appear to fully understand:

I haven’t been able to go to see one [theatre performance] because the rules and regulations don’t allow me to stand. After arguing with a few people at the theatre here on campus, one young [person]* took my number and did what [s]he* could,

and eventually [s]he* called me and said, “They have agreed to allow you to stand in the wheelchair area.” So it wasn’t a problem of standing, it was strictly a problem of rules. Not of reality. At least that’s as much as I could get out of our exchange. But this was disappointing too because I couldn’t stand just in a wheelchair place; I need a chair at the back of the theatre so that I could sit down when my legs get bad for a minute or two and then get up again—so I wouldn’t be disturbing anybody. But I wasn’t allowed to have a chair. If they gave me a chair, I was required to sit in it for the entire performance. I cannot sit for more than a few minutes at a time or my pain will become so great that I am unable to function . . . So it wasn’t a case of not being accessible; they weren’t willing to accommodate my disabilities, they were just trying to dance around the rules—rules which they didn’t understand or even know why they existed. And that was the issue: they didn’t know, nobody had an answer as to why they were following these rules. So accommodation and accessibility never even did get to be the issue. I mean, *it was the issue*, but they couldn’t even recognize it. This one young [person],* who was the go-between, . . . [s]he* was trying, but [s]he* wasn’t getting cooperation from . . . wherever else [s]he* was going for help. So [s]he* was great to the best of [her/his]* ability, but [s]he* was obviously a student and part-time employee—not having access themselves to the people in power. In other words, people in power were not solving the accessibility problem through [her/him]* with me. Never mind the fact that they didn’t come to me, or also that they weren’t even cooperating with [her/him].* So this is a major issue of accessibility as far as I’m concerned because my needs for accessibility were not

considered important *by the people who had the power*. The accessibility standard they recognized was for wheelchairs; nothing else seemed important. . . . Because they recognize the needs of a wheelchair user, they were prepared to accommodate them. But because there was no wheelchair involved in my situation, there was no accommodation. (Participant3)

It appears important to note that once again rigid adherence to policy, as well as a lack of understanding about diversity (needs) both created barriers that constrained Participant3's ability to access certain locations on campus and enjoy the staged presentations.

In-class presentations. During lectures and seminars, Participant2 also found that certain issues related to space often made information inaccessible. In particular, Participant2 noted that instructional presentations remained one area that [s]he had yet to access fully: "I know I said earlier that there are just some things that I haven't really fixed and that they're kind of just how they are. One of the things is presentation." For instance, during "seminars—you kind of could never really sit in the right spot because you never know" [where the presentation would take place], and even though "sitting in the front row wasn't really a problem" at this university, Participant2 noted that certain spatial issues would still arise that limited [her/his] ability to access presentations: "in [the large-scale auditorium],* front row in a usual lecture, there would for sure be things that I couldn't see." Although [s]he acknowledged that sitting closer was, sometimes, a simple solution, this was not a reliable strategy the majority of the time. Furthermore, the act of sitting closer also simultaneously limited accessibility because this act had the power to place students with disabilities in potentially alienating positions—alone, at the front of class:

I know that a *solution* would be to just sit closer, but I mean like no one wants to sit in an awkward place. Right? Like in front of the—it's just awkward. . . . So there are some rooms around campus that are helpful, that are ok. But actually, more so, the majority there's not like a convenient spot for what I would need or just like a regular seat for what I would need to sit in and watch. (Participant2)

Therefore sitting close was typically not a viable way to enhance the accessibility of presentations within a given space, from either a practical or a personal perspective.

These limitations within the physical educational environment also have connections to some of the people on campus as outlined below.

People on Campus

The second main category implicated in creating (in)accessible experiences for graduate students with disabilities were the people on campus. In particular, this category was typically comprised of (a) faculty, (b) disability support services, and (c) administrative staff. The people on campus acted both collectively and individually as allies who enabled accessibility as well as adversaries who limited accessibility. For the most part, all three groups were associated with contributing to accessible as well as inaccessible aspects within the university.

Faculty

Based on the experiences of the three graduate students with disabilities, faculty played an influential role in creating and constraining accessibility. In particular, the faculty group was comprised of two subgroups: (a) advisors and (b) professors.

Advisors. Advisors were identified as being particularly influential in shaping (in)accessible experiences for graduate students with disabilities in university. Advisors

occupied an important role in promoting access for graduate students with disabilities at university, but this faculty group was comprised of both allies who sought to enhance accessibility as well as adversaries who constrained it. At the research site, advisors were viewed as being allies who positively enhanced accessibility. However, past graduate student–advisor relationships (or lack thereof) at institutions the participants had attended were less positive and constrained accessibility. This was particularly noticeable with regards to (a) the level of support advisors provided to graduate student supervisees, and (b) the degree of flexibility advisors demonstrated towards schedules and fellowships.

Supportive relationships with supervisees. Advisors who developed supportive relationships with their graduate students were reported to have enhanced accessibility. In particular, those who offered support to their students in the form of encouragement, understanding, and facilitative dialogue to secure accommodations were regarded as allies who enhanced access. Participant1 and Participant3 both alluded to how their current advisors’ personal and professional experiences appeared to foster greater understanding of or sensitivity towards disability and accessibility issues than former advisors from universities participants had previously attended.

Participant3 noted that “the big thing is [my advisor’s]* encouragement.” In particular, [her/his] advisors often challenged normative ideals within the university that negatively affected the participant. For instance, Participant3’s advisor told [her/him] that “You do what you can do. You don’t need to do it the way somebody else can do,” and that “You are good, you are capable. We just need to direct your energy into your capabilities, not the rest of the world’s capabilities.” Participant1 also had more positive and supportive experiences working with [her/his] advisor at the current university than

at [her/his] former institution. In particular, the new advisor had “been encouraging,” especially in regards to obtaining accommodations. Participant1 noted that “it’s like night and day. My PhD supervisor [at this university]* has been more than understanding” (Participant1). Furthermore, while Participant1 was in the process of becoming officially documented to receive services from the university, [s]he noted that the advisor helped [her/him] to secure accommodations: “Fortunately one of the classes I was taking this term was my supervisor’s class, so . . . we were able to make a balance with what I was dealing with and the demands of that course” (Participant1). In addition, the new advisor also advocated on Participant1’s behalf so that [s]he could receive support in a fellow professor’s class: “just with the dialogue going on between those two people—the two professors are also good friends as well—so they’ve been very accommodating.”

Although Participant1 and Participant3 found their advisors to be supportive at the current university, both participants had also had previous student–advisor relationships—or lack thereof—at their former institutions that had limited their experiences of accessibility. For instance, after Participant1 acquired [her/his] disability, there was a lack of communication and support between the student, the advisor, and the staff at a time when Participant1 needed support “navigating” the system:

I didn’t know how to go about getting into the accessibility sort of thing. Like there just wasn’t that dialogue for, “Hey, let’s get you some accommodations. Let’s figure out a game plan.” There just wasn’t that dialogue. . . . It just wasn’t pushed. It wasn’t offered as a “Hey, let’s maybe (pause)—the decision is still yours, but let’s maybe see if we can get some connections going for you.”

(Participant1)

It is important to note that, at the onset of Participant1's disability, [s]he identified having issues with accessing print and electronic sourced information. This made researching information on [her/his] own difficult at that critical time. As the participant noted above, [s]he consequently described how this lack of support negatively affected [her/his] ability to make necessary connections with other groups, such as disability support services, to obtain accommodations at [her/his] former campus.

Participant3 also described feeling lost because of the lack of dialogue and close connection with [her/his] supervisor:

I had just started with an advisor. My advisor has just been set up. [S]he* didn't know much about me and I was not a complainer . . . so most people didn't know what was happening with me . . . But when I had an appointment with my advisor, [s]he* had no idea of what was going on. [S]he* knew I had had an accident, but [s]he* didn't know how serious it was. And I just hadn't gotten to know [her/him]* well enough at that point. I was one of those people who didn't know many people at the time. I didn't have a problem with that because I had been so used to being on my own with whatever previous issues that were going on, that I didn't expect to get help. I had no idea as to even where I should look. I was just lost because I didn't know. The doors weren't open to me. If I asked a question and somebody said to me, "We can't do that," then I accepted it. Nowadays I don't. (Participant3)

Participant3 also revealed that other factors, such as the participant's beliefs and behaviors, affected the nature of the relationship with [her/his] advisor. However, Participant3's experience illustrates how lack of awareness can be multifaceted in nature.

Advisors may not be fully aware of events, difficulties, and challenges faced by their supervisees and, without support or direction from their advisors during difficult times, supervisees with disabilities can feel lost and unaware of the services and options available to them.

Participant1 also described that there was a lack of understanding of what the participant was going through and how the newly acquired disability was influencing [her/his] studies. For example, Participant1 reported that, the advisor would “see my progress or not progress. And ah, yeah, it was a direct medical thing that people just wouldn’t understand.” In addition, when the student became physically sick from transcribing, [s]he had to pay—a high, out-of-pocket, personal expense not supported by the institution—for someone else to transcribe [her/his] research. However, when this—paired with the time needed to deal with the new disability—delayed Participant1’s proposed research schedule, the advisor was not supportive and this generated accessibility issues for the student:

This was all during my last year in my Master’s, so I was in the midst of trying to do my thesis—collect data and do interviewing and all that jazz. . . . So when I was able to somewhat kind of talk to people, I encountered having to transcribe things, and I couldn’t do that without making myself very ill. I wasn’t given any funding, any direction as to what I could do to have a transcription service do that for me at all. It was just, “Well, suck it up. Well, just get-err-done.” So I ended up going online and finding someone to do it for me. . . . And I got blamed for that, for that putting me behind—even though I wasn’t really behind—because my supervisor had wanted me to graduate (pause) to finish everything, I’d say, by the

end of March in my second year. . . . I didn't finish until the end of the summer.

But that's still a feat in itself. (Participant1)

Once again, the former advisor's lack of understanding about [her/his] student's particular needs and difficulties at that time contributed in part to the unsupportive nature of their supervisory relationship. As a result, "roadblocks and not being supportive" characterized Participant1's previous experience in graduate school.

Flexibility towards schedules and fellowships. Flexibility emerged as an important characteristic of advisors. Although Participant1 experienced problems related to [her/his] former advisor's inflexible deadlines, two participants praised their advisors at their present institution for being flexible, particularly in relation to schedules and fellowship opportunities (Participant1; Participant3). For example, Participant3's advisor helped [her/him] navigate the university's full-time status requirement for awarding fellowships:

[My advisor]* is helping me find ways around because I will lose my fellowship if I don't go full-time. . . . Well, it's not the funding [s]he's* helping me with; [s]he's* helping me hold onto it, so I won't lose it because I'm having trouble doing my studies full-time. And if I lose the full-time, I will lose the fellowship. And [s]he's* helping me keep it organized, in a way that another student would never be doing, so that I will not lose it. (Participant3)

The advisor exercised flexibility by having Participant3 audit a couple graduate courses during the summer before officially enrolling in the program, which the advisor then awarded as credit at a later date. This, in turn, accommodated the student's need for extra time and enabled the student to retain full-time status so that [s]he could receive the

fellowship (Participant3). Participant1 also noted that [her/his] supervisor at the current institution was flexible in regards to timelines to complete work related to [her/his] fellowship:

So I'm my supervisor's RA; so [s]he's* just been really accommodating with like the demands that [s]he* gives me, the timelines that [s]he* gives me . . . I'm a fellowship, so I'm not paid by the hour, I'm just given money and have to make up hours throughout the term—so [s]he* said, “You know, just extend those hours into December. We'll just pick at it.” . . . I've been finding that helpful.

(Participant1)

Therefore, an important factor that enhanced accessibility at the current university was the flexibility that the advisors provided the participants in order to allow the students to balance their academic schedules and maintain their fellowships.

It should be noted that, at the time of the interviews, Participant2 had not yet found an advisor to supervise [her/his] research; this was the next step in [her/his] degree program. As a result, student–advisor relationships were not mentioned more than likely because this was not yet something [s]he had experienced.

Professors. The experiences of the graduate students with disabilities revealed that professors were, for the most part, characterized as being allies who enhanced accessibility in university. However, participants noted that this did not mean that instruction at university was perfect(ly accessible): under certain circumstances, professors limited accessibility. For example, analysis of the participants' experiences revealed that certain in-class practices, often related to policy and pedagogy delivery, constrained accessibility within university. As a result, based on the experiences of the

graduate students with disabilities, three themes emerged with respect to professors: (a) the willingness to accommodate, (b) the use of disability accommodation policies to set the tone in class, and (c) the value of universal design principles of instruction.

Willingness to accommodate. Aside from a few noticeable exceptions, professors were typically reported to have demonstrated a willingness to accommodate the participants at various points throughout their studies. Participant2 emphasized this point by stating that “in general, professors are accommodating.” [S]he also provided examples of professors who were particularly accommodating during [her/his] previous undergraduate studies:

So in teacher’s college, it was always very clear that you weren’t going to get to choose your placement because that is just something that they couldn’t accommodate. And I probably could have went the [disability support services]* route and said that I can’t drive so I really need a placement for this program that is accessible nearby. But instead, I said that to them—to my cohort advisors, one of whom was my old high school principal, *conveniently*—and they said, “Well, ok, we’ll see what we can do.” And they just made it happen because they did want to be accommodating. In [a particular subject],* I just explained to the prof, “You know, this is it. Don’t worry about it too much.” And [s]he* always made an effort to be accommodating. (Participant2)

Once again, this experience reaffirmed the value academic relationships can have on enhancing accessibility when professors are aware of their students’ needs and willing to accommodate them.

However, it is important to note that graduate students do not just learn from professors, they work alongside them. In this respect, professors also demonstrated willingness to accommodate graduate students with disabilities in relation to academic working relationships. According to Participant1, one professor whom [s]he worked for was “very understanding” and demonstrated a willingness to accommodate [her/him]. In particular, [s]he noted that:

One of the profs that I TAed [or worked as a teaching assistant] for was an Olympic caliber coach, so [s]he* is very well versed in this thing [e.g., acquired disability(s)] and [s]he* was extremely accommodating with that. You know, [s]he* said, “Let me know if you can’t make a class because you need to stay at home.” You know, assignments, [s]he* said, “I’ll just let the students know you’re going through a thing right now and it will take a little bit longer for your assignments to get back to you. (Participant1)

But not all professors demonstrated a desire to accommodate disabled graduate students with respect to teaching assistant (TA) positions. Participant1 noted that there was “one professor who gave me a bad review because I couldn’t complete things on time even though I was upfront about everything.” [S]he also noted that because “it’s not very obvious” and “you wouldn’t know until someone actually disclosed that to you,” there was a “believability complex that comes around it [e.g., invisible disabilities]” which could lead to stigma.

Even when there is no prior academic or professional relationship between students and professors, university educators sometimes demonstrate a willingness to accommodate potential students. According to Participant3, one previously unknown

professor happened to run into [her/him] by chance in a hallway and noticed the participant was particularly upset. The professor then asked the then-unregistered student if [s]he could help:

[S]he* said, “Why? What happened? What’s going on?” And I said, “I was injured. I lost my Master’s degree [from my previous university]* and they told me that “I’d never be able to do it, et cetera, et cetera.” [S]he* said, “Come up to my office, we need to sit down and talk.” (Participant3)

During their meeting, the professor subsequently tried to resolve the issue by connecting Participant3 to a network of other professors who were willing to help the potential student organize accommodations that would enable [her/him] to return to graduate school at the new institution (e.g., the current research site). During this process, the professors also referred Participant3 to a specific program on campus that was known for having particularly accommodating professors:

So I walked across the road to the professor from the [particular program on campus],* went in—and [s]he* was so lively and energetic—and was like, “Oh heavens, don’t listen to any of *those* people [from your previous institution]!

Come to this university and we’ll get you your degree. Come here!” (Participant3)

As a result, Participant3 remarked, “what can you say about [the]* university under those circumstances? Even in spite of the fact that it’s not perfect and that there are problems for disabled people.” These cases highlight that while the system is not perfect, professors demonstrated that they can act as allies who promote accessibility through their willingness to accommodate graduate students with disabilities. However, at times, the willingness to accommodate was confounded by those who failed to set a positive

tone in the classroom through disability accommodation policies and by those who did not implement universal design principles of instruction.

Setting the tone in class with accommodation policies. According to the participants, although professors typically began classes by referencing the school's accommodation policy, the context in which this information was delivered appeared somewhat contradictory. Two students remarked that even though professors stated that they were willing to provide accommodations to self-identifying students with disabilities in their courses, they reported that these messages were contradicted by subtleties in the professors' tone (Participant2) and general vibe (Participant1). According to Participant2, when professors referenced disability policies in class, their tone often contributed to the creation of a contradictory context within the classroom because, while it was claimed that accommodations could be made available, accommodations were often presented in an obligatory tone as if they were someone else's (e.g., disability support services) responsibility rather than a desire to support one's students as a collective responsibility. For example, Participant2 noted that:

I've always—so at the beginning of courses, professors typically read and go through the syllabus, and it seems to be—I think this is true—that they're required to include [the university's]* paragraph on accessibility and access to services in it. It always seems to be in a very obligatory tone, which is like—and very non-personal—like, “If you have a need, like go—go to [disability support services].*” Some more than others, . . . which is what I think they're supposed to do. But it can be presented in a way that—you know, professors should be representing [the university]*—so, “If you have something to which you need an

accommodation, first meet with [disability support services],* and between you and [disability support services],* I'd love to help you out." And I never really got that tone from professors. . . . there doesn't seem to be a collective tone of, "It's fine. I'm totally willing to help you." (Participant2)

As a result, "the implementation of the university's policy to accommodate students [was done] in a way that is logistically accommodating, but culturally gives you the sense of accommodation not as much" (Participant2).

Participant1 also identified that there were issues and inconsistencies with professors regarding the initial accommodation disclosure process. Although [s]he noted that most of the professors tended to be fairly accepting of students disclosing their disabilities, the "vibe" of one professor set a tone that subtly discouraged the self-disclosure and accommodation process:

So for the new prof I was talking about [this term],* . . . I don't know how that is going to go. [S]he* is very friendly, but I just don't get that disclosure vibe where you can disclose about it. Like, I felt that with all the other profs I've talked to. They just give off that vibe that you can say whatever you want to and they just accept it. (Participant1)

Therefore, there appeared to be differences between the overall willingness of professors to accommodate. Unlike Participant2 who found that professors typically presented accommodation out of obligation, most professors typically demonstrated willingness to accommodate. As a result, the one unsupportive professor Participant1 reported seemed to be the exception to the rule. Participant1 attributed [her/his] department's typical willingness to accommodate to the professional knowledge the faculty had about

disability and the frequency with which faculty in [her/his] program self-disclosed having disabilities themselves.

Participant1 stressed the importance of having documentation as a “backup” in case the disclosure process took a turn for the worse, but Participant2 noted that they “much preferred the natural process of ‘I’m just making it happen’” and stated that [s]he no longer had an agreement in place at the graduate level with disability support services. Therefore, the “bureaucratic policy orientation of: ‘Get an appointment, get it documented—your requirement, whatever it is—and communicate it via that way’” (Participant2), can paradoxically de-establish the accessible climate it is intended to create.

The value of universal design principles of instruction. Universal design principles of instruction are another important factor that professors can use to enhance accessibility within university classrooms. With respect to lectures, breaks and advanced copies of notes were identified as two methods that facilitated access. Participant1 noted that “participat[ing] in three hour seminars is a struggle,” but [s]he noted that one professor who was “very accommodating” had “worked out like a break in the class.” In particular, “[the professor]* gave us a 20-minute break during the class, which allowed me to go wander around the hall and kind of reset my brain and whatnot. So I was able to get through that class.” Furthermore, in accordance to the principles of universal design, Participant1 noted that the breaks “worked for everyone.”

Unlike breaks, however, classroom presentations were not always universally accessible to everyone. According to Participant2, “the whole presentation medium”—which was reported as being a common practice within graduate classes—“just ends up

not being very accessible.” Furthermore, Participant2 frequently described the process of asking for an accommodation as being “awkward” and [s]he stressed how [s]he did not feel comfortable making requests for something extra from professors. Under these circumstances, the awkwardness of making or clarifying accommodation requests appeared to apply to both professors and students. For example, during class, it was noted that it could be uncomfortable for a professor to single out a student to ensure that the accommodation is sufficient, but it could be just as awkward for the student to articulate this request out loud in class. Furthermore, “impromptu add-on things during presentations also tended to be particularly inaccessible” (Participant2). For example, [s]he noted:

And then, thinking just about presentations— . . . sometimes what would happen is something impromptu, like someone thinks of something. So then either it’s on the projection screen or it’s not, and it’s in the notes beforehand or it’s not, but it’s something extra, something added on. So it’s maybe they’re writing it on the board or an overhead projector, just quickly like, “Hey, this is now what we’re talking about,” which is fine, but it’s then difficult for someone to interject and be like, “Oh, but wait! Sorry, I can’t see that.” You know? And I think as someone teaching, like you would have to have that in your mind. If you’re a classroom teacher, probably you would think about that all the time. But just as someone teaching at the university level, probably you wouldn’t be thinking about that, even if you remembered that I was there—and sometimes people for sure knew that I was there—that “Oh, this person probably can’t see that.” Or, it’s awkward then to question whether or not they can see it. (Participant2)

Spontaneous discussions can enrich lectures, but it is important for professors to remain cognizant of how this material may or may not have been effectively shared with all of the students within a given classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that professors remain aware of key factors, such as (a) how students often require material to be delivered in diverse ways that may or may not be disclosed, (b) how material may or may not be transmitted to students given these (potential) needs, and (c) how accessible instructional material could be provided in a proactive rather than reactive fashion.

Given that professors and students share the facilitative role in graduate school, the issue of (in)accessible instructional presentations applied broadly to individuals who held a professorial role within the classroom. As a result of this shared facilitative role, Participant2 highlighted the importance of making presentation material universally accessible, so that students with disabilities have equal access to material without feeling forced to self-identify and negotiate with their peers:

And in grad studies, like there are *a lot* of student presentations. It's a lot of that and like, do I tell every student that their handout should be in sized 14 font? So I'm probably not going to do that, which is why I tend to much more rely on my own solutions because then it's like changing what I do or changing what the rest of the world does. (Participant2)

As a result, this discussion highlighted how responsibility for making lecture materials universally accessible should be a concern of everyone within an educational environment.

Presentations could be made more accessible by providing notes in advance (Participant2). Participant2 identified that a particular professor was a "great instructor,"

in part because [s]he taught “a class where every time the presentation was available beforehand.” But [s]he also noted that the practice of providing lecture material in advance was inconsistent, which constrained the student’s ability to access lecture material and to employ their own strategies:

Sometimes the prof had already given the presentation, but they also tended not to do that because then people wouldn’t come. Moving through the years, like presentations always seemed to be available afterwards, or there was something on the screen that I couldn’t see. (Participant2)

Even though note-taking services were sometimes used as an alternative method of accessing information from in-class presentations (Participant2; Participant3), Participant2 remarked that “it just would have really been easier to see the presentation. But that was in the case when the presentation wasn’t available first.”

Therefore, professors can enhance accessibility by adopting universal design principles of instruction, such as ensuring that breaks occur during lectures and providing essential lecture materials in advance. Otherwise, professors who choose not to implement these principles can constrain accessibility for graduate students (with disabilities) in the university classroom environment. That being said, professors were generally found to be allies who enhanced accessibility given that they usually demonstrated a willingness to accommodate. Despite this willingness, however, the professoriate needs to address underlying issues with respect to policy and pedagogy that have been shown to limit accessibility.

Disability Support Services

Disability support services were discussed in relation to four subgroups, which referred to disability support services collectively as (a) a department, as well as in relation to specific services providers, such as (b) counselors, (c) caseworkers, and (d) technology and technology support staff.

Disability support services as a collective department. As a collective department, disability support services were identified as being a fairly positive source for enhancing accessibility for students with disabilities on campus. Participant3 described the staff working in disability support services as being “very understanding” and stated that “so many people in that department have been wonderful.” Furthermore, Participant2 noted that “the support I got from [disability support services]*—I mean, I definitely don’t want to complain about them—was definitely appreciated.” However there were some challenges associated with (a) lag time and (b) particular policy issues.

Lag time. Although certain services were identified as helpful, complaints were made about lag time in receiving services. Note-taking services had been used to the benefit of two students at various points during their graduate (Participant1) and undergraduate studies (Participant2), but Participant2 mentioned that note-taking services provided by disability support services were “kind of hit-or-miss” because “sometimes they had trouble finding a note-taker.” As a result, [s]he concluded that “there would be a lag time” between requesting and receiving notes. Participant2 also noted that there was also a lag time in terms of booking appointments:

Even getting an appointment with [disability support services],* although I like the people there, was difficult. You know, my own procrastination combined with their schedule meant that I ended up meeting them near-ish the end of September.

Which then meant that, you know, doing most things take a week. So then getting paperwork from them takes a week, and getting it out to professors takes a week. .

. . So it just created a lot of lag time, and so if anything happened.

All three participants also complained about delays relating to receiving services.

Although Participant2 described delays with respect to booking appointments and note-taking services, others students identified delays associated with particular services, such as counseling (Participant1) and assistive technology support (Participant3). (Counseling and technology issues are presented in more detail below.)

Policy issues. Access to provisions offered by disability support services was enhanced because services and accommodations were reportedly provided “free” of charge (Participant2). However, although having access to free services was identified as a benefit, Participant1 and Participant2 both complained about the late fee policy mandated by the disability support services department. For example, because Participant1 had to occasionally cancel meetings due to unpredictable side effects associated with [her/his] disability, [s]he noted that it was unfair that [s]he was charged for the very thing that had caused [her/him] to utilize the services:

I am a little frustrated with one incident. I did have to miss a counseling appointment and they charged me for it. But it was because I was having a bad day [because of the disability], so I couldn’t drive in for it. So that’s been my only like, “Ahhh (in frustration)!” But that’s not the counselor’s fault; that’s just policy and whatnot. . . . That was a little bit frustrating. It’s like I’m seeing [the counselor]* for the thing that is preventing me from seeing [her/him]* today.

(Participant1)

Participant2 noted that while disability support services had “some policies that sometimes made it difficult to negotiate being able to get appointment at certain times, or changing my caseworker, or missing an appointment which costs \$20,” [s]he also remarked that disability support services “represent[ed] for me some firm policies that worked to my accommodation benefit,” such as mandating exam accommodation policies.

Another issue associated with disability support services at the policy level was the lack of awareness about the services and supporting policies themselves. Two participants—both of whom had acquired their disabilities during the course of their graduate studies—reported feeling lost and described not knowing where to turn for help (Participant1; Participant3). As a result of multiple pressures and a lack of support, Participant3 withdrew from [her/his] initial graduate program of study. Participant1 identified that after [s]he acquired [her/his] disability, [s]he had a hard time finding information and policies that identified where or how [s]he could receive accommodations. Participant1 also noted that “It was like I knew they would have these policies, but they didn’t really speak to them. They were kind of a hidden thing, if that makes sense.”

Therefore disability support services were, for the most part, regarded as being a positive source of support that enhanced accessibility within the university. One participant even expressed frustration with [herself/himself] for forgetting what the department had done for them in the past: “oh man, if someone from [disability support services]* was here listening to this, they would probably be so upset because I’m forgetting all the things that they did for me” (Participant2). That being said, like any

complex system, there are still some potential issues that need to be addressed to improve the experience of accessibility on campus.

Counselors. Experiences with counseling services were found to be mostly positive. However, a couple of contentious incidents serve to illustrate that this service is not always perfectly accessible. Participant1 reported that counseling services played a significant role in creating an accessible university experience for [her/him], whereas Participant3 was only connected with the service after [s]he experienced undue stress from systemic delays in receiving other support services.

Participant1 described how counseling services had helped [her/him] transition into being a graduate student with a disability at the university by helping [her/him] to become officially documented as “disabled” and to navigate the disability disclosure process with professors.

One of the counselors I see over at personal counseling, [s]he* has been wonderful just with figuring out how to navigate things. You know, just as an objective ear to lean on . . . and figure out what to do so that I can be successful and not make myself sick at the same time. So that has been very good. [S]he’s* been very good. . . . So [s]he’s* been helping me kind of figure out what I need to do—the documentation I need. So we’re getting that process started for next term and . . . [s]he’s* like, “I don’t know everything, but I can connect you with the people that would. (Participant1)

Participant1 noted that the “only criticism is just sort of the availability of counselors,” which created a long wait time to receive services. Thus, [s]he recommended that “it

would be great maybe if they got more on campus—just to have that service more available” (Participant1).

Participant1 also noted that part of the reason why [s]he went to counseling services initially was because of negative experiences (e.g., the “roadblocks and being blamed for being inadequate”) that [s]he had encountered during graduate studies at [her/his] former institution. Although Participant1’s experience with counseling services was positive and voluntary, Participant3 was referred there due to unfortunate but potentially preventable circumstances. In particular, after Participant3 became incredibly stressed because [her/his] assistive technology was delivered late by one full term, the pressures to keep up and learn how to use new software eventually overwhelmed Participant3. These concerns were amplified by the participant’s fears that [her/his] grades would suffer, [her/his] fellowship would be canceled, and [her/his] degree would be lost a second time. As a result, [s]he was sent to a counselor and subsequently sent home on a mandated leave of absence:

When the school finally got the equipment to me and I started to learn how to use it—by the end of February . . . early March—I was so messed up, that the trainer—the person who was training me on the use of the equipment—sent me to a counselor. Because I was so strung out by *not* being able to do what I needed to do and thinking, “I’m going to lose it! I’m going to lose another term,” [s]he* sent me to a counselor. The counselor, after a couple of meetings, said—[s]he* started off right in the beginning saying, “You should go on medical leave.” And I kept saying, “I can’t! I can’t! I only have a limited amount of time. I’ll get through this. I’ll get through it.” But then one day I blacked out in the training session and

the next day when I went back to the [disability support services],* the counselor said, “I’m sorry. We’ve [disability support services and the student’s faculty advisor] taken this out of your hands. You’re going on medical leave and [your advisor]* is looking after it so you don’t lose your scholarship or anything.

(Participant3)

This may have been unfortunate at the time, but Participant3’s trusted advisor felt it was in the student’s best interest to “just get well,” so that [s]he could eventually complete [her/his] degree. It is also important to note that disability support services staff and the faculty advisor were concerned for Participant3’s well-being and both parties worked together to coordinate services to accommodate the student. However, this does not negate the fact that this situation could have been prevented had services been delivered on time or in advance of full-time studies, as had been requested by the student.

Caseworkers. Although the merits of disability support services were generally spoken of in a positive light, caseworkers were only mentioned specifically with respect to (a) frustration with changing caseworkers and (b) a lack of professional knowledge about graduate students.

Frustration with changing caseworkers. Participants expressed frustration when caseworkers were changed (Participant1; Participant2). In particular, Participant2 described the change as being frustrating because it meant that [s]he had to repeat the self-disclosure process again, which is partly why [s]he eventually stopped utilizing the services:

I don’t want to complain about [disability support services],* but there was a period of time where I had a particular caseworker and then it switched. This is

actually why, I think, I stopped going. They switched caseworkers, they switched *my* caseworker—although that person still works there—because they needed to like reallocate who had who so it was fair, I think. And that’s fine. *But* I never wanted to go through the process of re-meeting someone else. And that’s probably my (pause)—you know, you can’t argue with that, but, so anyway. Combined with not wanting to also make a connection with the professor and bother whoever it was teaching the course, and having to go meet with a new person and having to meet with the [disability support services],* I stopped doing that. (Participant2)

Furthermore, in reference to the frustration associated with having to repeatedly disclose to caseworkers, professors, and occasionally teaching assistants, Participant2 noted, “I would always just use my own methods of seeing it because that was just too many different negotiations with people. . . . And that required a set-up with [disability support services],* like *every time for every thing*.” However, Participant1 identified that [s]he was frustrated by an impending change in caseworkers because it placed [her/him] in a position of uncertainty:

So I met with the caseworker for the first time last week and I actually came out of it pretty frustrated. I don’t think they deal with a lot of graduate students, especially maybe like PhD level either. So [s]he* wasn’t very familiar with what happens in the PhD and whatnot. So I went in there knowing like, “I don’t know what is there to be offered to me” kind of thing. I was like, “These are my issues. What can we do?” And it was more sort of me coming up with the accommodations, but I didn’t know what I had room to play with. So I was a little

bit frustrated with that. But at the same time, it's nice having that label now. So having that legal label now to back me up on things should things go foul down the road. . . . [But the meeting] was like a 15-minute in-and-out kind of thing. So I was like, "Oh? Ok (sigh)." Yeah, so [s]he* wasn't even sure really if there was funding available for someone to like transcribe for me or something like that. Kind of my understanding is that this person is leaving [the university],* just from [her/his] email; I don't know. So maybe [s]he* was like, "I don't really care. I'm leaving in a couple of weeks." (Participant1)

As a result, given that the caseworker's employment with the department was coming to an end, Participant1 was unsure if indifference contributed to the lack of information the caseworker was willing to share with [her/him] about graduate-level accommodations. However, what did appear to play a part in this issue of accessibility was a need for professional development.

Lack of professional knowledge about graduate students. The previous section highlights not only how caring and consistent relationships were important to the participants, but that specific knowledge about the accommodation needs of graduate student are just as important. Furthermore, Participant1's experiences revealed that just because a student is studying at the graduate level does not mean that [s]he is fully acquainted with the system nor aware of available accommodations. Participant1 noted, in particular, that:

[The meeting—] It was more like, "What are your symptoms?" List it out so it's all on the forms. You know, and then it was like, "Well, what accommodations do you want?" It's like, "That's kind of what I was hoping to get from you. I don't

know what the options are. I'm new to this process, so I don't know." . . . But it was a little bit frustrating because we just didn't get anywhere. Like, my big issue was the transcribing down the road because I will be doing qualitative research and working as a research assistant. I'm like, "I don't think I can do that. I don't think that's in my mental capacity right now. So?" So there wasn't really any knowledge around funding or what to do. . . . I don't know. Maybe there's just not a lot of PhD students who come through there—*which is sad* . . . Like we have a comprehensive exam—I'm still figuring out one out—and then we do our actual research for the last two years. So I don't know what kind of accommodation options there are for me. Is there like a take-home comprehensive exam? Because some universities do that, which would be fine for me because then I could just pick at it. Or is it like other universities where you are like locked in a room for eight hours? *That* I'm going to have an issue with! (Participant1)

As a result, although Participant1 felt the caseworker “knew everything there was to know about the undergraduate level,” this level of awareness did not appear to extend positively to graduate studies. Consequently, this limited Participant1's ability to secure particular accommodations that were specific to [her/his] needs as a graduate student. For example, support to produce transcripts (e.g., funding) was noted as being an essential but nonexistent for Participant1, and the caseworker [s]he met with—as well as other university representatives (e.g., former advisors and administrative staff)—did not know how to accommodate this request. This is a significant concern given that both graduate-level scholarship and vocational work (e.g., research assistantships) in certain disciplines frequently involve compiling transcripts.

Technology and technology support staff. Technology and technology support staff have enhanced accessibility. However, at times, it was also noted that certain aspects of technological support provisions also limited accessibility.

The boom in technology. Two participants referenced that there had been a “boom” (Participant2) or “explosion” (Participant3) in technology. Participant2 noted that there were “more textbooks available online, more accessibility technology coming out, or more technology coming out that’s just in general good at being accessible” (Participant2). This boom in technology also enabled Participant2 to develop accessible solutions for themselves with general devices. In particular, [s]he noted that “rarely have I reflected on my disability applying to my graduate program because I just have so much experience from using—like how to enlarge things, good tech systems” (Participant2). As a result, the student noted:

I went through a number of different tech solutions, because I’m also quite interested in technology, and you know some software on my computer that was helpful. In fact, it was never really assistive devices that were helpful because I never *liked* using assistive devices. For me, I didn’t. It was always just enlarging something in a regular way or just using like a usual device in a slightly bigger way was always helpful. (Participant2)

Although the boom in computers was helpful for Participant2 to secure accommodations using general technology, Participant3 had mixed feelings about the “explosion in technology” because [s]he “couldn’t afford the changing equipment” due to the loss of [her/his] income after becoming disabled. Furthermore, unlike Participant2, Participant3 felt that assistive technology had enhanced accessibility for [her/him]. [S]he noted that “I

have also been provided with Dragon Naturally Speaking and Free Natural Reader on my computer” (Participant3), which enabled [her/him] to demonstrate [her/his] academic potential:

If I tried to say it to somebody, they don’t understand me because I get the words all mixed up. But when I write, I can write and I might go back the next day and read it and say, “I haven’t got a clue what I was talking about. *Let’s do it again.*” So that I can correct it and say, “No, this is what I want to say. That didn’t come out right.” And I can correct it. (Participant3)

Technology support staff. Both Participant2 and Participant3 noted that the technology support staff were valuable in helping them learn how to use technology in an effective, accommodating, and accessible manner. Technology support services made reading—which was described as being *typically* “difficult”—more accessible for Participant2 because the department scanned textbooks “where a PDF otherwise wasn’t available” so that the student “had digitized what [(s)he] otherwise had difficulty seeing.” Participant3 noted that the staff member recognized their individual needs and gave an alternative strategy for the student to learn the assistive software as [s]he waited for it to arrive:

The staff member who provided the equipment was great to communicate and figure out what would work best for me and [s]he* gave me a bit of general technology upgrade information to get me started, so that I could play with it over the Christmas break . . . And [s]he* was there for me when I called, when I couldn’t get the equipment moving. (Participant3)

Participant2 also spoke positively about the particular technology specialist, noting that “the person responsible for the digital technologies . . . [S]he* and I met once or twice to actually just talk about if there were things available that could be helpful to me.”

Participant3 also acknowledged that “the trainer was really good and really patient . . . So [s]he* would work with me with where I was, not with the basic program of computer use.” Therefore the technology support staff were consistently spoken of in a positive light.

Problems with assistive technology and technology support services. Although technology can enhance accessibility within higher education, problems were also reported. Some of the challenges identified by the participants included stress associated with having to learn new software during the already busy school year (Participant3) and new ways of learning that did not necessarily align with preferred learning styles (Participant1). For example, Participant3 noted that “It wasn’t the software that stressed me. It was not knowing the software, plus being so far behind.” These problems were sometimes confounded further by delays in receiving technology and financial pressures of not being able to keep up with the technological “explosion of computers” (Participant3). Participant1 also commented that [s]he was:

Learning a lot of new adaptive ways, also having to learn new ways of learning—I’m a visual-kinesthetic learner and now I’m having to learn it auditory, which is not going so well—you know, having to listen to a textbook on audiotape is a lot different from me physically reading it. So it takes me a lot longer to read.
(Participant1)

Furthermore, these challenges were also confounded by policy issues that prevented certain types of students—such as those enrolled as auditees—from receiving personal assistive technology accommodations (Participant3). For example, Participant3 had expected to be accommodated when [s]he audited a course prior to [her/his] official enrollment in the graduate program, but [s]he did not receive the assistive technology at that time as expected:

When I first got up here, I took two auditing courses . . . I had hoped that the university would get me the equipment, et cetera, that [my faculty representative]* had promised. [S]he* had said that “They can set you up so that you can do these courses successfully.” But then when I got in to do the auditing, they weren’t able to provide the assistance when auditing. They couldn’t set me up until September when I started my full-time program. They could only get *started* after I was registered. It was *Christmas* before I got the equipment. . . . But I thought that I could get it in the summer so I would know how to use it before September because I needed a whole lot of *extra time* for everything due to my disabilities. So perhaps I just made an assumption—although I had mentioned getting an early start on learning the equipment to someone, perhaps my professor. In any case, no one corrected my assumption. (Participant3)

Given the pressures students (with disabilities) often experience in graduate school, the delay created a significant amount of undue stress for Participant3. In particular, [s]he noted that:

At that time I was almost halfway through my second term and I still didn’t have a handle on it, which is why I should have had access to the training as soon as I

was accepted into the program. They should have been able to set me up so that I could have started learning it in the summer. (Participant3)

Had the services been offered to Participant3 in advance, it could have potentially minimized the amount of unnecessary stress placed on the student.

Administrative Staff

According to the participants, administrative staff were also an significant group of people on campus who shaped (in)accessible experiences for graduate students with disabilities. This group was subdivided into two subgroups: (a) administrative assistants and (b) administrative officials. The latter group was typically characterized as having power and being adversarial.

Administrative assistants. Administrative assistants were typically represented as allies when they were associated with the students' particular department and when they possessed high levels of awareness. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge appeared to constrain accessibility. However non-departmental administrative assistants were often characterized as being adversaries of accessibility for disabled graduate students.

Department-specific administrative assistants. Participant1's lack of awareness about obtaining accommodations at [her/his] former institution was confounded by the lack of awareness of the departmental administrative staff. Although Participant1 spoke with department-specific administrative assistants after [s]he acquired a disability, the staff could not provide [her/him] with information that could have enabled [her/him] access to disability support services and obtain accommodations. In particular, [s]he noted that this staff member lacked awareness of protocols that were designed to offer support to graduate students with disabilities:

But then it was like if something comes up out of the norm, it was like, “Hmm (Long Pause). We don’t know what to do; we don’t have an action plan or something like that for a student like you.” And I don’t know, maybe they just didn’t experience a lot of people at the graduate level there that had a disability. I don’t know, maybe they had never experienced that at all. (Participant1)

Lack of awareness about accommodations for graduate students with disabilities appeared to be characteristic of multiple actors within the participant’s former institution, given that similar remarks were also made about the advisor’s lack of insight as well. The participant noted the departmental administrative assistant’s lack of knowledge may have been attributable to the lack of time [s]he spent on campus:

At [my former university],* I think it was just the admin staff in our department, they were part-time so they were only there a few days a week. So I think there was a little bit of disconnect there. They were friendly, but I think it was just the amount of time they were on campus—they probably just didn’t know what was going on. Um (pause), probably couldn’t help me, like, navigate things.

(Participant1)

Therefore, although the staff member was described as being friendly, a lack of awareness created problems during the student’s moment of need.

Participant3’s experience at the present site contrasted Participant1’s encounters at [her/his] former institution. The former reported that [her/his] departmental administrative assistant was incredibly knowledgeable, and therefore very helpful, particularly in relation to keeping track of registration and enrollment; a process that had

become complicated by course codes and program changes that occurred throughout the student's extended course of study:

If I have a bad time and I lose something there and I have to go pick it up and it's changed, then I am totally lost and [the department's administrative assistant]* has got answers instantly. [S]he* is amazing; absolutely wonderful at keeping things straight. When I've registered in the wrong stream—because there are different streams for different areas—and the first few times, I got them mixed up and ended up in the [wrong]* stream. . . . [s]he* would go and look through the registration and figured out what was wrong . . . And [s]he* fixed it instantly.

(Participant3)

As a result, Participant3 and the administrative assistant were able to troubleshoot certain issues easily, thereby conserving valuable time for the participant's academic use.

Non-department administrative assistants. However, when Participant3 sought assistance outside [her/his] department, the experience was not as positive. In particular, [s]he felt that the “Graduate Studies department office has been frustrated with [her/him]*” because [s]he required more of their time to answer questions. [S]he largely attributed this frustration to occupational “pressure on them,” such as work-related deadlines and performance expectations from supervisors to “get it done,” noting that:

They don't want to slow down and listen to the individual, they just want the work done . . . That's what I mean when I say it's not accessible: they don't have the time to treat the individual like an individual. . . . they are not allowed to look after the individual and give the individual the time needed for them to understand what is being said. . . . But it's the person who cannot keep up who is the person

who suffers most. It's the person who needs the accessibility who is left out in the cold because they can't get the answers they need. It is the time, patience, understanding of their needs—whatever they need to make things accessible for them—that seems to be missing. (Participant3)

Participant3 acknowledged that “there are lots of possibilities” to explain why this happened—noting that “there are other situations where it's the employee[s] themselves who may be intimidated because they don't understand” or “maybe they're having a bad day”—but [s]he largely attributed this to not having enough time to “loo[k] after someone at *their speed*.” Therefore, experiences with (in)accessibility appear to reveal that there is a connection between time administrative assistants spent on campus, their levels of awareness, and their ability to support graduate students with disabilities. Furthermore, according to Participant3, pressures associated with time—deadlines for administrative assistants and students to complete work by a certain moment in time—also created pressures that constrained access at university.

Administrative officials. Administrative officials with decision-making power were reported as being adversaries to providing access for disabled graduate students. Shortly after acquiring their disabilities during the course of their graduate studies at their former institutions, two of the participants faced the threat of being kicked out of their programs. Both students reported not having the necessary time due to competing medical (Participant1; Participant3) and legal (Participant3) demands or energy, support, and awareness of policies and resources that could have helped them “fight the system” (Participant3) and advocate for themselves. As a result, one participant felt forced to withdraw from [her/his] previous graduate program while the other obtained [her/his]

master's degree despite the lack of support. Participant3 reported that "because I wasn't able to get my health back and get all the other stuff together soon enough, so I was kicked out of the program." Despite the challenges [s]he faced at that time, school officials said, "[s]orry, we can't accommodate you any longer" Participant1 also experienced a lack of understanding from the "graduate program coordinator" at [her/his] former university. [S]he reported that this school official:

Told me I had to go to class or get kicked out of the program. . . . I was also not being able to think much through it at that point and feeling kind of defenseless at that point. So I didn't have enough to defend myself further, I was just sort of dealing with what was going on with me . . . I just kind of went, "Well (pause), I don't know what to do." (Participant1)

Participant1 also noted that [s]he "experienced a lot of unfairness towards accommodations and whatnot" because another graduate student, who had acquired a similar injury several weeks prior to Participant1, was "given so many accommodations, financial leeway, and access to things on campus" that Participant1 was not. In particular, unlike the other student, Participant1 was not permitted to switch to part-time status nor given permission to miss class. Subsequently [s]he was told that "if I didn't show up to class the following week I would get kicked out of the program" and that "You've got to suck it up and push through."

In the end, both participants reported that their time was often consumed by the need to fight the system. Participant1 noted that [s]he had spent most of [her/his] time at the former institution "fighting all the policies, roadblocks, and everything like that." Furthermore, Participant3—who, as previously discussed, also confronted policy

problems when [s]he attempted to find accessible parking nearby essential buildings as well as when [s]he tried to attend a theatre performance—noted that “persons in power . . . don’t seem to be flexible enough to listen.” In particular, [s]he reported that greater “flexibility” would lessen the time individuals with disabilities had to spend “fighting the system.”

The Culture of Awareness

The culture of awareness was identified as an important factor in establishing an accessible university environment for all. Participants identified that education could be used to foster an accessible culture within the university by increasing awareness. More specifically, participants identified that educational initiatives in relation to (a) professional development and (b) faculty-specific knowledge and research sometimes fostered the development of a culture of awareness.

Creating an Accessible Culture

To create a more accessible university, the participants all noted that it was important to establish a disability-friendly environment or “culture” (Participant1; Participant2). Participant1 noted that “I spoke to you a lot about the culture at [this university]*—of it just sort of being a more accepting culture here. So I think that’s a huge piece—for anything really.” In particular, [s]he discussed how there appeared to be a “culture shift . . . between the campuses” such that “the culture here [at this university] seems a little bit more welcoming and a little bit more open to that kind of thing” (Participant1).

Participant1 felt that there was a more accepting culture at the current university, but Participant3 described that this was still something [s]he was waiting to experience

across the entire university. In particular, although [s]he had had positive experiences, Participant3 also had internalized the lack of acceptance that existed within the institutional culture towards people who were different than the so-called norm; something that [s]he believed [her/his] fellow disabled peers also encountered:

I find it's hard on myself because I can't do what I used to do, what everybody else—or what many other people can do. . . . Maybe that would change with a person when they are more accepted in the environment, you know. I see so many people in this program who are disabled and they have the same problems; they hold themselves responsible for not being able to do it because everybody else holds them responsible—because they are not like the average North American white [fe]male.* (Participant3)

As a result, Participant3 thought that a culture of acceptance could ease the negative emotional element that is experienced in an otherwise unaccommodating environment. Similarly, Participant2 argued that a culture of acceptance could be used to counter alienation or awkwardness that can result from the current approach to providing accommodations. To address this, [s]he noted that it was important to “promote a culture that accessibility is for everyone.” Participant2 later confirmed that this statement alluded to the concept of universal design. [S]he believed this approach was important to enhancing accessibility because a universal approach could foster a sense of togetherness while simultaneously addressing everyone's needs along a continuum of support:

The barrier and the recommendation to the university would be to promote a culture that accessibility is for everyone, and that it's not, you know, there's a set of people where it totally works for and then everyone else. Like, accessibility to

me . . . is always a gradient of things [e.g., abilities]. . . . it tends to be that I get accommodations. But these things always benefit everyone. So don't make the people that need specific accommodations objects of the accommodation; just have a culture that supports that we're all in this together, and that this is all part of a process, and that we're all part of the process. (Participant2)

Participant2 noted that raising awareness was important, but [s]he also identified that [s]he was not necessarily comfortable with becoming the object of another person's attention or curiosity. Instead the participants suggested that there needs to be a general "cultural feeling" (Participant2) that promotes acceptance, access, and accommodation among *all* people on campus:

I think it would be better if there was—and I don't have a solution for this but—just some sort of cultural feeling of, "You know, it's ok. It's ok with everyone else that you need to ask because you can't see something or something. Or it's ok with everyone else that they know if they're presenting, they should have a handout that's slightly bigger. Or, um, if they're going to write something quickly on the board, they should also read it out loud so it's ok for everyone to also know. And there's also really not a space for that in a regular class setting; and by space, I mean a time—there's not a time to, "Let us now recognize all the things we should now think about. *It's not in relation to anyone in particular!*" You know what I mean? But what would that even sound like? (Participant2)

Therefore, although it is important for people within the university to "now recognize all the things we should now think about" (Participant2) with regards to accessibility, it is imperative that certain people (with disabilities) are not singled out in the process.

Participant2 was not exactly sure how to achieve this general cultural feeling, but there was consensus amongst all of the participants that education is an essential component of creating a culture of awareness and accessibility.

Changing the Culture through Education

Participant3 noted that “we still have lots more learning to do” with respect to individuals with disabilities within the university. However, Participant2 argued that the responsibility for creating this culture extends beyond disability support services. As a result, participants commonly recommended that there is a “need to have more awareness programs” (Participant1) or educational initiatives on campus. In particular, Participant1 noted that [s]he thought, “we need to have more of a campus-wide education campaign” because there is a lack of knowledge about disabilities on campus, particularly at the graduate level. For example, lack of awareness about accommodations for graduate students with disabilities appeared to be characteristic of multiple actors within various institutions. As a result, both Participant1 and Participant3 commented that it appeared that people did not think about the presence of graduate students with disabilities at the university. Participant3 also noted that, aside from the support [s]he received from [her/his] department and disability support services, “the rest of the university doesn’t seem to even know we exist.” As a result, Participant1 noted, “we need to have more knowledge . . . about these invisible disabilities and . . . especially, I think, for like graduate studies.”

Education was viewed as a potential way to address the underlying lack of awareness. For example, Participant1 noted that:

A good thing that would be great would be just to have more education. Even just like across Canada and campus. Like educating people about disabilities and educating them that “Yes, graduate students have disabilities too. It’s not just the undergraduates.” (Participant1)

Participant3 reaffirmed this need to raise awareness about disability on campus, noting that:

Everybody has different abilities and disabilities, so you can’t—unless you’ve actually experienced it—you can’t be expected to understand. So we have to be patient and try and teach them. . . . The experience it has to be shared to help those people know more . . . Exposure is opening those doors, but we still have a long way to go. (Participant3)

Participant2 also spoke about the current lack of knowledge about disability and accommodation issues on campus, indicating that “through no fault of anyone, a lot of my limitations to accessing something—to seeing something—have *always* been a function of what other people were thinking.” Or by imposition, not thinking. As a result, [s]he recommended that future students, “really, really, really try to be open about accessing accommodations, and advocating for accommodations, and suggesting ideas for people because they don’t always know ways” (Participant2).

Changing the university culture through professional development. Two participants spoke about their experiences with AODA training at two different universities. Participant1 reported that the AODA training sessions [s]he had to attend at [her/his] former university were poorly run. [S]he noted that “the AODA stuff is garbage,” because:

The education program that they do is like, “Well, we need to make sure that we have wheelchair ramps that are accessible.” I mean that is great, but there is just not an understanding of things like learning disabilities and those sort of invisible disabilities. You know, it’s a lot of, “Provide accessibility for physical disabilities”—for sort of obvious ones and things like that. . . . When I worked at [my former university],* you had to go every year to one of these workshops, and they (pause), I never thought they did a good job. Sometimes they would be run by students who didn’t know what they were talking about. (Participant1)

Participant1 was not impressed with the content of the *AODA* training at [her/his] former institution whereas Participant2 suggested that the training session at the current site was decent. Participant2 noted that “I don’t really have a critique about the content. A lot of the content I think was contemporary thinking about disabilities.” However, what [s]he did critique was the culture in which the program was delivered and how this ultimately affected its delivery:

So I’ve done the training, and I’ve never thought much of it, and I don’t think that the university students—who take it because they need to because they’re part-time employees—think much of it. . . . It’s almost like you’ve got this really great set of information—so, the training—and then you’ve got this group of people who don’t know how to place it exactly. And it’s tough for me to put myself in their shoes, but it almost seems like it’s just one of those things you just have to go through, and “Ugh,” and then it’s done. And maybe that represents a culture of not really being that open to talking about disability. . . . So the content is ok, but

whether or not the content is ok, it's really more about you've got this group of people . . . well, they're not receptive to it. (Participant2)

According to Participant1 and Participant2, *AODA* training does not ensure accessibility in its current state. Furthermore, Participant2 identified the paradox that the success of the *AODA* training is dependent on the current culture of awareness in the university; the very culture that it is intended to address.

In order to attend to negative or unsupportive attitudes, Participant3 identified that it is imperative that people become educated about disability and accessibility earlier in life:

[Education] might be in the form of a required course for every student who comes into the university. . . . Or as far as I'm concerned, they should be doing it in Grade 9. It should be a required course starting in Grade 9. I know a lot of this comes from my life experience and my studies . . . but we have to find some way to provide required education. The abusive people out there are just not educated in those areas. I'm sure they would change their outlook if they saw it from the other side of the fence. So that's education and it should be required education. (Participant3)

Therefore, although it is imperative that a culture of awareness is raised within the university to promote accessibility for individuals with disabilities, it is important for this type of education to build upon pre-existing cultural feelings that are derived from prior knowledge and understanding.

Changing the university culture through Faculty-specific knowledge and research. Two participants provided examples of how certain academic disciplines

actively cultivated professional awareness about disability and accessibility amongst their faculty members and students (Participant1; Participant3). (Note: Although identification of academic disciplines and departments might be valuable, it is not disclosed so as to protect the participants' rights to confidentiality). For instance, the participants noted how certain professors affiliated with these departments created positive change on campus through advocacy. In particular, Participant1 noted that one department fostered meaningful levels of awareness at the current university, which in turn welcomed a greater degree of self-disclosure within the program, because:

They're trained to deal with mental illness, disabilities, things like that. Like that's what they're trained to do [in their field]. So I think speaking with a lot of professors trained that way, and like . . . grad students who are just (pause)—they think that way. So the culture is a lot better that way. They just sort of get it! And, I mean, some of them are even open about disclosing their own issues with mental health and things like that. They're just like, "Yeah, you know I got the help I needed and here I am now—I'm so successful." So there seems to be a lot more of an open community understanding. I know there's even a lot of profs that deal with disabilities in that department. They're just like, "That's who I am."

(Participant)

Participant3 also described how one professor acted as an advocate because [s]he actively challenged institutional practices and policies that constrained access for persons with disabilities on campus. As a result, professors from these academic disciplines appeared to demonstrate leadership in terms of cultivating a culture of awareness, acceptance, and accessibility.

Interestingly, both Participant1 and Participant2 noted that, although others can provide support, a student with a disability must ultimately “advocate for yourself.” Yet both also recognized that this process was not always “comfortable.” But although Participant1 recommended that disabled students should “also find someone who can advocate for you on your behalf; so find like an ally essentially that you can trust and has a lot of connections,” Participant2 stressed that “at the end of the day, you really have to . . . take action for yourself and make it work.” Despite this, the participants identified the importance of professorial leadership in promoting a culture of awareness and acceptance in academia. Participants also noted that factors, such as self-disclosure, knowledge construction, and advocacy, fostered a welcoming climate that was conducive to disclosure.

Participant1 noted that although research played a role in developing awareness, it had not been used in a productive manner to support students with certain disabilities at [her/his] former institution. Although [s]he “was part of a lot of those concussion research studies” that increased [her/his] level of understanding of [her/his] disability, insight obtained from these studies did not appear to be shared with the faculty to increase their understanding and awareness. In particular, Participant1 noted that:

It also mind-boggled me because [the university]* had a concussion research lab within its [particular department],* so there were several profs who researched this stuff. So I didn’t get why there wasn’t this *trickledown effect of knowledge and understanding* of what people were going through. (Participant1)

Based on these experiences, Participant1 reaffirmed the importance of knowledge and understanding being shared within the university.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of the data collected for this generic qualitative research study informed by the principles of a constructivist based grounded theory design. This study focused on the experience of (in)accessibility from the perspective of three graduate students, from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). As a result, data analysis centered on addressing the following major research question: What has been the experience of (in)accessibility for three graduate students, from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s)? To develop understanding about the phenomenon, subquestions were used to identify what key factors do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having both enabled and limited their access while studying at university, as well as what recommendations do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) make to enhance their experience of access at university.

Each of the participants had diverse experiences related to their disabilities and their experiences with (in)accessibility in graduate education, but the participants also shared similar and overlapping insights and experiences. From this, three main categories emerged from the data such that (in)accessibility at university was related to (a) the places on campus, (b) the people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness. Within the first two categories, many participants identified factors that both enhanced and limited experiences with accessibility for students with disabilities studying at university. The final category focused on the productive capacity education can play in building

knowledge and raising awareness to create an accessible and accepting culture that is welcoming to all students (with disabilities) on campus.

In the next chapter, I draw the study to a close. A summary of the study and the final results are presented, followed by discussion related to the results of the study.

Following this discussion, I present the model that resulted from the study, outline the scope and limitations of the study, make future recommendations to facilitate subsequent research, and provide final conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how the findings relate to the body of literature and to provide concluding remarks about the insights gained from conducting this study. First, I present an overview of the study and summarize the results found. Once information about the study is shared, I discuss how some of the results relate to key findings within the literature. Then I identify the implications of the findings and I present the model that was derived from the results of this study. Following this discussion, I present an overview of the scope and limitations of this study, recommend potential considerations for future research, and provide final conclusions.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to better understand the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s) at one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario. As a result, the major research question guiding this study was: What have been the experiences of (in)accessibility for three graduate students, from one mid-sized university in Southern Ontario, who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s)? Three subquestions were also used in order to address this main research question:

1. What key factors do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having enabled their access while studying at university?
2. What key factors do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) identify as having limited their access while studying at university?
3. What recommendations do disabled graduate students (with disabilities) make to enhance the experience of access at university?

In turn, this study generated understanding about how access at university was (or was not) experienced and provided insight into how accessibility can be improved upon in the future.

This generic qualitative study was informed by the principles of a constructivist grounded theory. Data analysis practices were influenced by constructivist grounded theory procedures described by Charmaz (2004, 2011) and Creswell (2008). As a result, memos were used throughout the research process to record insights, code data, develop categories, and draft the written report to document the results of the study. Reflexive research practices, such as reflective journaling and a critical peer review process, were also adhered to in this study.

Data were collected between December 2014, and January 2015. Participants were recruited using gatekeepers who had access to graduate students at the research site through electronic means of communication and could disseminate letters of information on my behalf. In keeping with the notion of inclusiveness, I embraced a broad definition of disability to account for the wide array of ways in which disability manifests. Once participants received letters of invitation and expressed interest in participating in the study, interviews were conducted with three graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s). Initial interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix A) and transcribed verbatim with the exception of identifying information that would compromise confidentiality. Participants then had opportunities to review their transcripts—through email and in-person follow-up interviews (see Appendix B)—to confirm and clarify the collected data. All three of the participants attended follow-up interviews. Two of these follow-up interviews were

transcribed at the two participants' request because large volumes of new data were provided during these sessions.

The study was also influenced by Freirian and Disability Studies discourses that foster collaborative forms of critical engagement. Just as transformation can result from the development of critical consciousness (see Freire, 2005), critical reflection or praxis informed by social models of disability can foster people to challenge normative beliefs, practices, and structures in their environments that are problematic to the disabled (see Gabel, 2005; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Rather than regarding disability as a deficit, this study adhered to the philosophy espoused by Michalko (2009) that disability represents a “difference that makes a difference” (p. 414). As a result, I attempted to view “disability [a]s a teacher” (p. 414) that could work alongside graduate students with disabilities to provide valuable lessons about the experiences of (in)accessibility at university and generate understanding to foster more accessible practices in the future. As a result, similar to Gabel and Miskovic (2014), a social model of disability was adopted by focusing on institutional characteristics—as opposed to solely individual ones—that can create barriers or enhance accessibility (see also Misovic & Gabel, 2012). This approach was followed in order to demonstrate sensitivity and respect towards disability while collecting information about the experiences of these students and to foster social justice in regards to disability issues on campus.

Importance of the Study

As previously discussed, universities in Ontario are now subject to legislation such as the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* (2005). As a result of these legislative changes, access has become an essential condition within

organizations, including universities, in this province. Although these changes alone might well necessitate the exploration of the experiences of disabled graduate students with (in)accessibility at university, researchers have identified that research related to this particular student demographic remains undeveloped (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin, 2011; NEADS, 2014)—particularly in Canada (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014)—even though enrollment of disabled students in Canadian graduate programs continues to rise (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014, Roberts et al., n.d.). Consequently, research concerning the experiences of (in)accessibility from the perspectives of graduate students with disabilities remains limited. This means that the rich data these students may provide, given the number of years they have spent embedded within the university culture, remains largely untapped.

Despite this, only a small number of Canadian studies have attempted to fill this research gap. My review of the literature revealed that few studies have focused on the importance of graduate students from an administrative perspective (see Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010) or accounted for the perspectives of disabled graduate students studying in Canada as a collective group of only master's and doctoral students (see NEADS, 2014), a collective of students with disability at university (see Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012), or a collaborative project with faculty (Grundy & McGinn, 2008) or faculty and fellow student (see Grundy et al., 2003, 2005; Myers et al., 2014). Of these studies, research in Canada was conducted in Ontario (Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005), Nova Scotia (Myers et al., 2014), Quebec (Erten, 2011) and Alberta (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). NEADS conducted the first comprehensive pan-Canadian study to collect quantitative and qualitative data related to the experiences of graduate

students with disabilities (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014). Therefore, only a limited number of studies have featured the perspectives of disabled graduate students in them.

By interviewing graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s), the results of this study contribute to the development of literature in an important but undeveloped area of research. In particular, this generic qualitative study expands on the literature concerning the experiences of graduate students with disabilities in Ontario, Canada. The results may provide valuable information to key stakeholders that increases awareness about (in)accessibility within universities. Findings may allow faculty, staff, administrators, policymakers, and fellow students to be more fully cognizant of supports and barriers to access, as perceived by disabled graduate students. Furthermore, insights could be used by these stakeholders to transform the university into a more accessible system and space in the future.

Summary of the Findings of the Study

The presentation of the findings of the study included a holistic description of the participants, a collective definition of the term accessibility, and a detailed description of the factors that both enabled as well as limited access at university and could enhance the experience of access in the future.

Participants

The participant sample was comprised of three graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s). In particular, the participants identified as being legally blind, having a concussion/post-concussion syndrome, and having a brain injury. One of the participants identified that [s]he had been blind since birth,

whereas the two remaining participants had acquired their disabilities during the course of their graduate education. Additionally, one of these participants had also acquired a back injury around the time [s]he was accepted into a program at the current research site. The participants were research-based graduate students, currently studying at the master's and doctoral level in Science and Social Science programs, and were at various stages of degree completion. Two of the participants also had previous graduate school experience from other institutions in Canada (one of which was located in Ontario); one was able to graduate and the other one was forced to drop out. In addition, both male and female students were represented in the study. The sample was characterized by similarities as well as differences due to the diversity inherent in disability.

Defining Accessibility

According to the participants, accessibility was discussed in broad terms. Similar to disability, accessibility was found to present itself along a continuum where some people require more or less accommodations than others. Accessibility also referred to the modification of particular elements within an environment that were based on expectations of normalcy, as well as the demonstration of supportive attitudes about accommodations and awareness about accommodations, including but not limited to legal requirements.

Experiences with (In)Accessibility

Based on the experiences of the participants, (in)accessibility within the university environment appeared to be related to three main categories: (a) the places on campus, (b) the people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness. These findings encompassed a rich array of experiences that participants had had throughout their time

in university—for example, at both the graduate as well as the undergraduate levels, and at the sample site as well as at other universities in Canada (one of which was located in Ontario).

Places on campus. Places on campus were found to contribute to (in)accessible experiences on campus. The three subthemes that emerged from this category were (a) the need for space, (b) the issues associated with navigating the university terrain, and (c) the need to make presentation space visible. Overall, elements of the campus were largely found to be inaccessible. However, the need for space illustrated that the physical environment could be used to enhance accessibility when departments retrofitted workspaces or provided respite locations to accommodate disabled students. Elements within the physical environment (e.g., green space) helped some to manage the effects of their disability, but created barriers for others who had difficulty navigating the university terrain.

Objects and obstacles in the environment related to “inaccessible ‘accessible’ parking” (Participant3) and parking enforcement policies, low-visibility ParaTransit pickup locations, cumbersome policies related to ParaTransit, and unwelcoming facilities that were not accessible (e.g., without elevator access) or were unsafe to access (e.g., steep and icy ramps) for students with physical disabilities. Although mobility training improved navigation around campus for one participant, signage (e.g., room numbers, campus maps, exam location display boards, et cetera) sometimes made space or objects in the environment (e.g., menus, price tags, et cetera) less visible. As a result, poorly designed signage could, at times, communicate a sense that aesthetics were valued above accessibility.

There was also a need to make presentation space visible with respect to staged presentations (e.g., theatre performances, assemblies) and in-class presentations. Staged presentations on campus were found to be inaccessible because of barriers related to the orientation of the stage, the policies governing who could be accommodated and how, and the level of awareness staff in charge of staged presentations had. Access to instructional presentations was also limited by the construction of the physical environment. One participant identified that [s]he could not predict where to sit in seminars to ensure that [s]he could view presentations; accessing lecture presentations was also problematic. Sitting in the front row was not a reliable strategy to ensure that displayed material would be visible. Furthermore, having to relocate to another spot during lecture was not always possible because of the lack of resources (e.g., moveable chairs) in the classroom; nor was it necessarily desirable due to the sense of alienation or awkwardness it could create. (In-class presentation could also be shaped by pedagogical practices used by professors as will be discussed below.)

People on campus. People on campus—such as (a) faculty, (b) disability support services personnel, and (c) administrative staff—contributed to the experience of (in)accessibility at university for graduate students with disabilities by acting as allies who enabled accessibility as well as adversaries who limited accessibility.

Faculty. Faculty—such as (a) advisors and (b) professors—were influential in creating and constraining accessibility. For the most part, faculty were viewed as a positive source of support at the current research site. However, certain issues related to inaccessibility were associated with both faculty subgroups.

Advisors. Advisors played an important role in shaping accessible experiences for disabled graduate students, particularly in relation to the amount of support graduate student supervisees received from their advisors and the level of flexibility advisors provided to students regarding their schedules. Inflexible deadlines and lack of understanding limited access whereas flexibility towards schedules enhanced access and ensured funding opportunities (e.g., fellowships, research assistantships) were maintained. Faculty with awareness of disability and accessibility issues were found to be more accommodating. Students who had positive student–advisor relationships reported that their supervisors often fostered inclusive educational experiences for the participants and acted as advocates on their behalf when necessary. However, relationships characterized by lack of support, lack of communication, or lack of awareness or misunderstandings of accommodation needs, contributed to the experience of inaccessibility.

Professors. Professors could enhance or constrain accessibility for self-identifying graduate students at university. Professors contributed to the experience of (in)accessibility depending on (a) the degree to which they demonstrated a willingness to accommodate, (b) the manner in which they used disability accommodation policies to set the tone in class, and (c) the degree to which they integrated universal design principles in their instruction. The willingness to accommodate related not just to students academically, but also professionally (e.g., teaching assistantships or TA, positions, research assistantships or RA positions, et cetera). Professors who were unwilling to accommodate were often associated with having a lack of awareness about or negative attitudes towards disabled students or accommodation needs. Lack of

awareness about accommodation needs also limited access to instructional material for some students. This appeared important given that some students chose not to disclose their disabilities. Other strategies included the use of breaks during class and the provision of notes in advance. Participants also suggested that universal instructional design strategies adopted by students facilitating presentations could help ensure student-led presentations are accessible. As a result, participants noted that professors should adopt proactive strategies, such as universal design principles, to present lectures in ways that can meet the needs of a variety of learners within the classroom—including but not limited to those with disabilities; otherwise, professors risk creating inaccessible classroom environments.

Disability support services and personnel. Like faculty, disability support services personnel were found to be a fairly positive source of support for self-identifying graduate students on campus at university. Disability support services influenced the experience of (in)accessibility for disabled students on a collective departmental level and on an staff-specific level (e.g., counselors, caseworkers, and technology and technology support staff).

Disability support services. Although disability support services personnel provided positive supports to graduate students who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s), lag time in receiving services and policy issues limited access. All three participants complained about delays in relation to receiving services. Lag time was often experienced in relation to booking appointments or receiving specific services (e.g., note-taking services, counseling, and assistive technology). In addition, although students appreciated that services were offered free of charge, missed appointment fees were

found to be problematic—especially when appointments were missed because of unpredictable side effects that resulted from their disabilities. Furthermore, after some of the participants became disabled during their graduate studies, lack of awareness about disability support services on campus prevented these participants from accessing services and obtaining accommodations at university.

Counseling services. Counseling services were typically regarded as beneficial. Counselors were able to enhance accessibility by easing difficult transition periods for students. One counselor was able to help address one participant's lack of awareness about receiving accommodations and [s]he connected the student with appropriate staff who could help [her/him] to obtain documentation and to secure accommodations on campus. In addition, the counselor also helped the participant to navigate the disclosure process and to process negative emotions related to past graduate school experiences with inaccessibility. Similarly, another student was referred to counseling services in response to rising stress levels, which were attributed to having to endure significant delays in order to receive necessary assistive technology (e.g., receiving technology one full term after it had been requested). Although faculty and disability support staff collaborated to support this student after the stressful event, the situation in theory could have been preventable had access to technology been provided on time or in advance, as had been expected. Accessibility to counseling services was also limited by the lack of availability of counselors and long wait times to receive services on campus.

Caseworkers. Participants voiced frustration with caseworkers in relation to (a) the frequency of caseworker turnover and (b) the lack of professional knowledge these service providers had about graduate students. As a result of changing caseworkers, one

participant subsequently stopped seeking accommodation arrangements with the department and another reported that the anticipated changes left [her/him] questioning if and how [her/his] needs would be supported in the future. In addition, one participant reported that although caseworkers were familiar with undergraduate accommodations, caseworkers appeared unsure of how to accommodate graduate students. For example, one major concern of the participant related to having to produce transcripts. However, the caseworker did not provide [her/him] with any recommendations or strategies that could have helped [her/him] to address this accommodation concern (e.g., sources of funding), which affected [her/him] academically as a research student and vocationally as an RA.

Technology and technology support staff. Technology and technology support staff were identified by participants as having both enhanced as well as limited accessibility. In particular, the “explosion in technology” (Participant3) and technology support staff were typically found to have enhanced accessibility. The “boom in technology” (Participant2) created access to a number of traditional and assistive technological tools that have served to enhance accessibility; however, not everyone can afford to keep up with these changes. Participants praised technology support staff for their ability to provide useful services and for share knowledge about technology that could be used to support the specific needs of the participants. However, accessibility was constrained by stress, particularly in relation to learning new technologies and waiting a significant amount of time to receive assistive technology. For example, although one participant was under the impression that [s]he could arrange for assistive technology to be put in place while [s]he audited a course prior to the start of the office

school year, [s]he subsequently learned that this was not the case. Consequently, the technology was delivered at the end of the fall term and, as a result, the student became so stressed from the encounter that she was placed on a mandatory medical leave.

Administration. Administrative staff, such as (a) administrative assistants, and (b) administrative officials, also shaped (in)accessible experiences for graduate students with disabilities.

Administrative assistants. Department-specific administrative assistants familiar with school policies and who were willing to support disabled students enhanced accessibility; those who had limited professional knowledge, however, tended to constrain it. Non-departmental administrative assistants appeared to constrain accessibility. For example, one participant described how some non-departmental administrative assistants appeared to be unwilling or unable to work with the participant at [her/his] speed and made the participant feel as though [s]he were a source of frustration. Although the participant sympathized that a number of reasons could have contributed to this experience (e.g., staff felt pressured to perform quickly, they had had a bad day, they were intimidated because they lacked understanding, et cetera), the outcome was that the disabled student did not feel supported.

Administrative officials in positions of power were identified by some participants as adversaries who limited accessibility. For example, immediately after two of the participants acquired their disabilities as graduate students at other institutions, they were confronted with a new set of additional challenges—such as having to learn how to manage a new medical condition, having to engage in legal proceedings, having to learn how to obtain accommodations—in addition to their academic responsibilities. However,

had greater flexibility and support been provided, the participants would not have had to waste valuable time fighting the system. Furthermore, administrative officials did not appear to recognize these extenuating circumstances and, consequently, both students were told by administration that they would be kicked out of their programs. During these exchanges, both participants felt ill-equipped to defend themselves against the pressure from administration. As a result, one participant dropped out of [her/his] initial graduate program.

The Culture of Awareness. Participants identified that an accessible university environment for all was contingent on creating a disability-friendly culture of awareness on campus and across the country. Some of the students discussed how they felt there was a cultural shift upon transitioning to the research site from graduate programs at other institutions. However, it was also identified that measures still had to be taken to ensure that this shift was adopted throughout the entire university. In order to foster an accessible and accepting culture on campus, participants considered that it was necessary to increase awareness through education. For example, awareness programs and educational campaigns could be used to address the underlying lack of awareness about students with disabilities at the graduate level. To minimize negative attitudes, one participant suggested that education should be provided in Grade 9. Recommendations to foster awareness through education also included the need for professional development. As previously discussed, some of the caseworkers appeared as though they could have benefited from professional development related to working with and providing accommodations to disabled graduate students. Participants also questioned the effectiveness of *AODA* training. Although education like *AODA* training was important,

it needed to be rooted to a cultural feeling so that no one was singled out. Therefore, in order to make people on campus more receptive to education about disability and accessibility, a disability-friendly culture on campus—characterized by awareness and acceptance—was necessary. Similarly inclusion of disability and access issues in the classroom was seen as important. One participant also noted that educating people early on in life (e.g., Grade 9) was also an important part of ensuring an inclusive university culture.

Faculty-specific knowledge and research was believed to have had an effect on accessibility. Programs where faculty had awareness of and training related to disability enhanced the experience of accessibility. Furthermore, certain faculty from specific programs had acted as allies by advocating on behalf of disabled students to challenge university practices and policies that constrained access. However, although one participant acknowledged that research could foster awareness, [s]he noted that “there wasn’t this *trickledown effect of knowledge and understanding* of what people were going through” (Participant1, emphasis added). Therefore, insight obtained from these studies had not been used to support disabled students nor had it been used to increase faculty awareness. As a result, it became important to “promote a culture that accessibility is for everyone” (Participant2)—particularly in the classroom. As a result, participants recommended that faculty should employ universal design principles to allow for a diverse array of needs to be met proactively along a continuum of support.

The results of this study are limited to the experiences of three graduate students, from one institution in Southern Ontario, who self-identified as disabled or as having a disability(s). As previously identified (see the Scope and Limitations of the Study section

in Chapter Three), the findings are not intended to represent the experiences of all graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s). Furthermore, due to the limitations related to the size of the study, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive account of all of the possible (in)accessible experiences graduate students with disabilities may have had in university. However, given that qualitative research is not designed to produce generalizable findings (Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010), these limitations were considered acceptable. Rather, given the relative lack of data related to the experiences of disabled graduate students previously mentioned, this qualitative study has been designed to explore an underdeveloped area of research, to stimulate academic interest in this topic, and to encourage the production of future studies related to this phenomenon.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study are supported by the literature. Similar to Titchkosky (2011), participants identified that various types of people and places on campus shaped their experiences with (in)accessibility at university. In particular, Titchkosky's understanding of access is based on the idea that "*access* [i]s a complex form of perceptions that organizes socio-political relations between *people* in *space*" (p. ix, emphasis added). Therefore, although Titchkosky and I both explored access in relation to disability at two different universities in Ontario, the results of my small study from one mid-sized university appear to reflect several key concepts Titchkosky identified in her critical conceptual analysis from one large-sized academic university. Furthermore, Titchkosky's book is premised upon asking critical questions to examine the dynamics of disability and access in relation to people and places that are often not thought about.

Participants mirrored the importance of raising awareness through educational initiatives—including awareness campaigns, required courses, professional development, and research—in order to shape the overall culture on campus.

Furthermore, like the literature, the participants were typically satisfied with professors and disability support services on campus. However, just like in the literature, that was not to say that issues of inaccessibility did not arise. A common trend in the study and in the literature was that issues of inaccessibility often related to lack of awareness by staff (e.g., administration, faculty, disability support service providers, et cetera) and students.

Gabel and Miskovic (2014) found that the overall presence of students with disabilities on campus was underrepresented by formal disclosure statistics. Although research indicated that disabled students comprised nearly 10% of the student population, they were “culturally represented as [less than] <1%” (p. 1150). Consequently, disabled students at university were thought of as being nonexistent. Similarly, participants in this study identified that there was a (mis)perception that disabled graduate students did not exist. According to Titchkosky (2011), the underrepresentation of disability is problematic at university because “saying disabled people are not present, even though they are, serves to justify a sense of a mythical absence while being part of the productive sensibility that maintains what is, the status quo” (p. 82).

As a result of the underrepresentation of disability on campus, Gabel and Miskovic (2014) warned that this could constrain resources because demand could exceed expected capacity. Similarly, participants in this study felt that this cultural misrepresentation influenced how services were delivered. For example, although

students experienced issues of inaccessibility with respect to disability support services because of limited resource availability (e.g., access to counseling sessions) and delays associated in receiving services (e.g., obtaining assistive technology, booking appointments, receiving notes from note-taking services), the perceived underrepresentation of disabled graduate students on campus appeared to have constrained the provision of resources for this group of students—particularly because caseworkers lacked awareness about the needs of disabled graduate students and how to accommodate them. However, under these circumstances, awareness could consequently be regarded as a resource that is intimately tied to university culture.

For example, although caseworkers were typically regarded as being proficient at providing services to undergraduate students, one participant identified that the caseworker [s]he had worked with appeared to lack professional knowledge that would have enabled [her/him] to address the needs of and devise accommodation strategies for master's and doctoral students. It was also noted that caseworkers did not appear to have a firm grasp of what the educational requirements were for graduate students. This result from my study reaffirms the recommendations of Grundy and McGinn (2008), who noted that disability service providers should acquire greater awareness about graduate level education and accommodation needs specific to graduate school. However, in order to support this call for professional development, Roberts et al. (n.d.) and Rose (2010) identify that knowledge has to be generated about the essential requirements of graduate programs because the determination of reasonable accommodations is contingent on awareness of essential requirements. As these policy issues receive attention, my results suggest that education can be used to raise awareness of the presence of graduate students

with disabilities in university and research can be used to foster the production of knowledge that can be used to foster understanding—such as insight into the accommodation needs of graduate students to foster professional development sessions for disability support staff and faculty.

For example, one type of accommodation need expressed by graduate students with disabilities addressed in this study as well as in the literature concerned the production of transcripts (see Grundy et al., 2003; see also Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005). The literature, in particular, outlined the barriers that one disabled research student experienced while attempting to produce transcripts and the alternative method [s]he devised to address these issues (i.e., the participant-as-transcriptionist approach). The need for awareness of transcription-related accommodations was also demonstrated; one of the participants found that, due to the nature of [her/his] disability, transcribing made [her/him] physically ill. As a result, [s]he required accommodations to assist with this component of her academic and vocational (RA) work. However, university staff (e.g., a faculty advisor, a caseworker, et cetera) did not appear to be aware of alternative techniques or sources of funding to assist with transcription—indicating that the faculty member could have also benefited from professional development around issues of access within research. Instead, the student was forced to pay for transcription services as an out-of-pocket expense and was made to feel bad for the extra time it required to produce the transcripts. The results of this study suggest that had faculty or support services been aware of literature related to making graduate education and research more accessible (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005), an alternative strategy could have been proposed in an attempt to proactively address the

particular facet of graduate research that was found to be inaccessible. Therefore, although Grundy et al. (2003) note that the participant-as-transcriptionist approach was not necessarily useful to everyone, awareness of this alternative strategy might have spared the participant from having to pay others substantial fees to transcribe [her/his] data as well as having to locate sufficient funding to offset this accommodation expense. Yet this is only one example of graduate student accommodation needs that requires attention. For example, one participant raised concern about receiving accommodations for comprehensive exams.

Although student–advisor (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Farrar, 2006; Zhao et al., 2007) or student–faculty relationships (Cress, 2008) received some attention in the literature, with the exception of Myers et al. (2014), it appears that relationships with caseworkers were overlooked in the literature. Participants in this study also raised other issues related to caseworkers, such as frustration that resulted from frequent turnover. As a result, although professional knowledge was a valuable trait, the quality and continuity of student–caseworker relationships was important. However, when caseworkers changed, one participant expressed that [s]he did not want to have to endure the disclosure process again while another felt uncertain as to how [her/his] accommodation needs would be met. This sense of uncertainty of not knowing if one’s accommodation needs would be met by caseworkers resembled findings presented by Gabel and Miskovic (2014), where it was reported that students found themselves in “liminal discursive spaces” (p. 1152) when they could not predict how receptive new professors would be to their accommodation needs before a class. Although these experiences were shown to have the potential to create anxiety (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014), the results of this study

seem to implicate that not being able to predict how a caseworker will respond to their accommodation needs and the feeling of being left in the lurch can significantly undermine the experience of accessibility.

According to Parks et al. (1987), “psychological toll[s]” had also resulted from negative experiences students had in graduate and professional school. Similarly, some of the participants in my study described that they had experienced psychological tolls as a result of having encountered roadblocks, having received assistive technology late, having faced the threat of being kicked out of one’s program, and having been made to feel inadequate—all of which created a need for participants to visit therapeutic counselors. Despite these negative experiences, the participants identified that counselors were a positive source of support. However, after comparing my findings with the literature, it appears that counselors can either create or correct barriers that affect accessibility for graduate students with disabilities. For example, although I found that a counselor had helped one participant navigate the accommodation process, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) found the opposite was true for one of their participants. Aside from these experiences, research related to the degree to which counselors provide support to disabled graduate students remains limited. Nevertheless, as this study has demonstrated, the services counselors provide can be valuable, particularly when they collaborate and coordinate supports with other university representatives (e.g., caseworkers, faculty supervisors, et cetera) to support students.

Although disability support service personnel were considered to be important both within the context of my study as well as within the literature (see Erten, 2011; Myers, 2014; West et al. 1993), one of the participants noted that the responsibility for

creating this culture extends beyond disability support services. This view was reflected in the literature because, as Huger (2011) stated, the entire university community had a collective duty to ensure that disabled students had access—both academically and socially—to a welcoming and inclusive postsecondary institution. By extension, other authors have argued that disabled graduate students should also be welcomed into the graduate research community as well (Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Myers et al., 2014). Although participants in my study did not discuss formal events that occurred in the research community, such as academic conferences or theses defenses, as was mentioned in the literature (e.g., Farrar, 2006; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2005; Lash, 2013), barriers were presented in relation to informal events such as associate meetings for graduate students. For example, one participant indicated that [s]he was unable to participate in the informal meeting because the event was hosted in an inaccessible building—not only was there no elevator, but the ramp to access the building was located outside, was covered in ice, had insufficient handrails, and had a dangerously steep incline. Given these conditions, the participant was quite literally and figuratively left out in the cold. Students in the literature also described how they experienced inaccessible and unwelcoming conditions while navigating the postsecondary educational terrain because of a lack of elevators (Myers et al., 2014; West et al., 1993) and winter weather conditions (Erten, 2011; Myers et al., 2014). However, participants in my study identified that barriers also emerged with respect to signage, theatre presentations, assemblies, and classroom presentations.

Farrar (2006) found that often obstacles that disabled graduate students researchers encounter are unintentionally created. Similarly, the participants described the barriers were typically due to a lack of awareness among the people on campus. It is therefore important to considering that people on campus have considerable influence in shaping the university environment and, in turn, the degree to which accessibility or inaccessibility is experienced (see also Titchkosky, 2011). In order to critically analyze how access issues shape understanding of relationships of people in space, Titchkosky (2011) noted that “we can wonder about what is really meant when people talk about access, struggle for inclusion, or even get surprised when issues of access arise” (p. ix). As a result, based upon my findings, people within the university need to become aware of how their actions have the potential to enhance or limit access. For example, people on campus design policies, enforce regulations, organize meetings, coordinate events, instruct students, apply pedagogical practices, label space “accessible,” and experience inaccessibility. However, people on campus could also identify barriers, challenge unjust policies, advocate for inclusion, support disabled students, learn about graduate-level accommodations, provide flexible accommodations, implement universal design principles, become educated about disability and the importance of access, and foster a culture of awareness campus. As a result, many of the issues of inaccessibility experienced by disabled graduate students are shaped by people in some capacity. Therefore, the path to overturning these barriers can also be shaped by the people on campus. This supports the notion expressed by Huger (2011) that everyone on campus needs to demonstrate proactive leadership to foster accessibility throughout the university community.

Given that Huger (2011) recommended that events should only be held at accessible locations, one has to ask why events are still being held at inaccessible locations. Furthermore, why are inaccessible spaces on campus not closed or modified to enhance accessibility? It is equally problematic that the construction of new buildings, which were believed to be fully accessible, can still present challenges to some disabled users (see Myers et al., 2014). In my study, navigational issues and general awareness on campus is limited as a result of poor signage (e.g., signs where aesthetical features trumped accessibility-based ones, such as room numbers, maps, menus, prices at the bookstore, et cetera). However, beyond shaping access literally, signage could also shape access in a more abstract sense. For example, Titchkosky (2011) identifies that signage could shape conceptual beliefs about the provision of access within a space, such that the accessibility logo often leads people to assume, often without question, that an officially labeled space is accessible. However, the life experiences of some disabled persons can reveal that some “accessible” spaces are actually inaccessible. This issue is particularly common within supposedly “accessible” washrooms on campus (Titchkosky, 2011). Similarly, based on the results of this study, one of the participants reveals that this notion also presents itself in relation to “inaccessible ‘accessible’ parking” (Participant3). Although parking spaces might be labeled as accessible, the reality for some students with disabilities is that they are not based on the results of this study. Similarly, West et al. (1993) report parking on campus often creates challenges for disabled students. For example, parking spaces are too far from buildings where students needed to go (West et al., 1993). This is demonstrated in my study when one participant and [her/his] peer attempted to park in a parking spot closer to their desired location—albeit, one reserved

for instructors—they were fined, even though there was no demand for the spot at that particular time. Although the professor advocated on their behalf to address the issue with parking services and to fight the ticket, West et al. (1993) has called for the need to engage in initiatives to raise awareness about the importance of accessible parking among the campus community. However, at this moment in time, what appears necessary are awareness-raising initiatives targeting parking officials and staff who are responsible for creating and enforcing parking policies. Huger (2011) appears to support this suggestion given that she noted that administrators who are conscious of the needs of students are better prepared to create an accessible campus.

Other spaces that are also expected to be accessible are classrooms. Huger (2011) noted that professors were influential in “set[ting] the tone” (p. 8) in classrooms to ensure that accommodations were provided and an accessible, disability-friendly, atmosphere was maintained. The notion of setting the tone was matched verbatim by one of the participants in my study. In particular, participants described that the tone or general vibe that professors gave off when discussing accessibility policies served to subtly convey the faculty member’s willingness to provide accommodations. While adherence to the bureaucratic policy approach might have been thought of as being logistically accommodating by staff, one participant noted that this was not conducive to welcoming accommodations culturally within the classroom because it felt as though professors had deferred responsibility to disability support services rather than proactively fostered personal relationships with students needing accommodations. This, in turn, reinforces the notion that bureaucratic practices can constrain access for disabled students at university (Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Huger, 2011; Titchkosky, 2011). As a result, the

findings of my study indicate that professors should ensure that the attitude, tone, or vibe in which they deliver accommodation policies is welcoming and presented out of the spirit of inclusiveness, not obligation. As one of the participants suggested, there is a profound difference between presenting policy out of obligation and conveying a “collective tone of . . . [being] totally willing to help” (Participant2). Therefore, professors should also express a collective desire to work with students and disability support services to implement accommodations willingly, not solely because policy has mandated the provision support. Once again, this reasserts the notion that implementing an accessible and inclusive community is a collaborative undertaking rather than the sole responsibility of disability support services (Huger, 2011).

However, the act of acknowledging policies is not necessarily a bad thing. Similar to Erten (2011), two of the participants in my study could have benefited had faculty shared information about how students could have gained access to disability support services and received accommodations. However, what my study has shown was that this support was particularly essential for the participants who acquired disabilities later in life. For example, given that both participants became disabled during the course of their graduate studies, they experienced a range of issues of inaccessibility stemming from how they were (not) received by the university after this encounter and as a result of not being aware of how to navigate the bureaucratic system. This matter was confounded further because co-occurring responsibilities (e.g., meeting with lawyers, appointments with medical staff, recovering physically) that occurred after disabilities were acquired placed pressures on the students that competed with their academic obligations. Lack of awareness about services was identified in the literature (see Gabel & Miskovic, 2014;

Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; West et al., 1993) and other authors also indicated that the bureaucratic nature of the university environments could complicate the lives of disabled students trying to access supports and accommodations (Huger, 2011; Gabel & Miskovic, 2014). This suggests that it is important to establish a collective culture of awareness so that students can receive services at any point in their academic careers, if necessary, and to ensure that other faculty, staff, and students are equally aware of (the importance of) accommodation provisions on campus so that they can offer support when students request information and assistance about accessing disability supports—thus reaffirming the call for leadership expressed within the literature (Huger, 2011). However, in addition to raising awareness about services offered, it was also noted that general awareness of universal design principles should be provided to make the environment and instruction accessible without students having to request accommodations and be “objects of the accommodation[s]” (Participant2). Similarly, the application of universal design is also supported by the literature (Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n. d.).

The results of my study also identified that physical classroom environments can make instruction inaccessible. In particular, in-class presentations were difficult to view and were not necessarily made accessible by sitting in the front row. One participant identified that, at times, even if [s]he had wanted to sit (uncomfortably) close to a screen, the physical classroom environment did not always allow for this to happen—for example, in some classroom spaces, chairs were not always available or able to be moved to the front of lecture halls. My research suggests that the conditions of the physical classroom and the pedagogical practices adopted by faculty intersect, and can subsequently shape the degree to which a student can experience accessibility. Olkin

(2002b) argues that conditions such as this are problematic because they prevent the seamless integration of disabled students in graduate classrooms. She notes that educational environments should be accessible to disabled and nondisabled students; for example, “if a student with low vision sits in the front row, care should be taken to set up the room so that other students also sit in the front row” (p. 70). Therefore, in addition to setting a collective tone as previously discussed, the willingness to accommodate also related to the proactive strategies—such as universal design principles—professors were willing to integrate into their classrooms according to the results of my study and the literature (see Farrar, 2006; Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n.d.). Similarly, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) found that traditional classroom practices need to be changed in order to enhance accessibility of instruction within classrooms. As a result, new approaches that foster accessibility for a range of students—including those with and without disabilities—are often the result of proactive (Farrar, 2006; Huger, 2011) and universal design (Huger, 2011; Roberts et al., n.d.) practices.

This raises the question of how we foster awareness to enhance accessibility. First, according to Huger (2011), the collective university community needs to “commit to a culture shift to facilitate the full participation of all students, including those with disabilities” (p. 3). Similarly, one participant suggested that in order for awareness-raising initiatives to work, there has to be a “cultural feeling” (Participant2) in place that encourages meaningful integration of this information into people’s lives. Therefore, as part of the culture of awareness, participants noted the need for a campus culture that is more receptive to acquiring accessibility-based information. Otherwise, without cultural

values in place, the promotion of accessibility through education—such as *AODA* training—can be viewed as a task one simply has to “get through” (Participant2).

Participants noted that educational initiatives could play a role in raising awareness and promoting acceptance, access, and accommodations on campus that could benefit everyone. For example, they suggested that accessibility could be enhanced by raising awareness through research, compulsory courses, professional development, awareness campaigns, and mobility training. Similarly, the literature typically supported the need to raise awareness (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; West et al., 1993) through educational initiatives such as “awareness campaign[s]” (Nocella, 2005, p. 155), “training workshops” (Erten, 2011, p. 108), and “educational seminars” (Erten, 2011, p. 109). Furthermore, it was noted that all students could benefit from exposure to disability issues through university courses (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Olkin, 2002b) and access to “general orientations and education of the student body” (West et al., 1993, p. 466). For example, Olkin (2002b) noted that disability issues should be included as part of instructional content related to diversity issues; Olkin (2002a) cautioned, however, that this was not always a regular practice in graduate psychology courses. Linton (1998) also warned that the inclusion of disability in the curriculum can be a benefit or a barrier depending on the research traditions that are used in particular disciplines. It was also identified that faculty (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; Olkin, 2002b) and disability support service providers (see Grundy & McGinn, 2008) could benefit from professional development.

Miskovic and Gabel (2012) noted that research could also be used to draw attention to invisible issues related to disability in higher education. Similarly, based on

my findings, research was identified as a valuable tool that could foster awareness of key stakeholders on campus. However, one participant noted that although some faculty at [her/his] former institution were developing knowledge about particular disabilities, this information had not been shared within the immediate academic community to foster awareness that could, in turn, be used to support students. As a result, [s]he did not witness evidence of a “*trickledown effect of knowledge and understanding of what people were going through*” (Participant3, emphasis added) into the local university culture. Consequently, the participant reported that [s]he had experienced barriers at university that may have otherwise been prevented or addressed had awareness been fostered within the institution.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Based on the aforementioned results of this study as well as the literature previously discussed, the creation and maintenance of an accessible campus for disabled students appears to be contingent on the development of educational initiatives as well as a culture of awareness.

When inaccessible barriers present within the university environment, people on campus should engage in collaboration and continued learning. As a result, the act of fostering accessibility is a continuous process in which people on campus must engage individually and collectively. The *Trickledown Effect Model* operates as a bidirectional loop where all three components—the culture of awareness, the people on campus, and educational initiatives—are embedded within the university, and can influence and inform one another (see *Figure 1. Promoting accessibility through the Trickledown Effect Model*). However, the university and the three active components that comprise

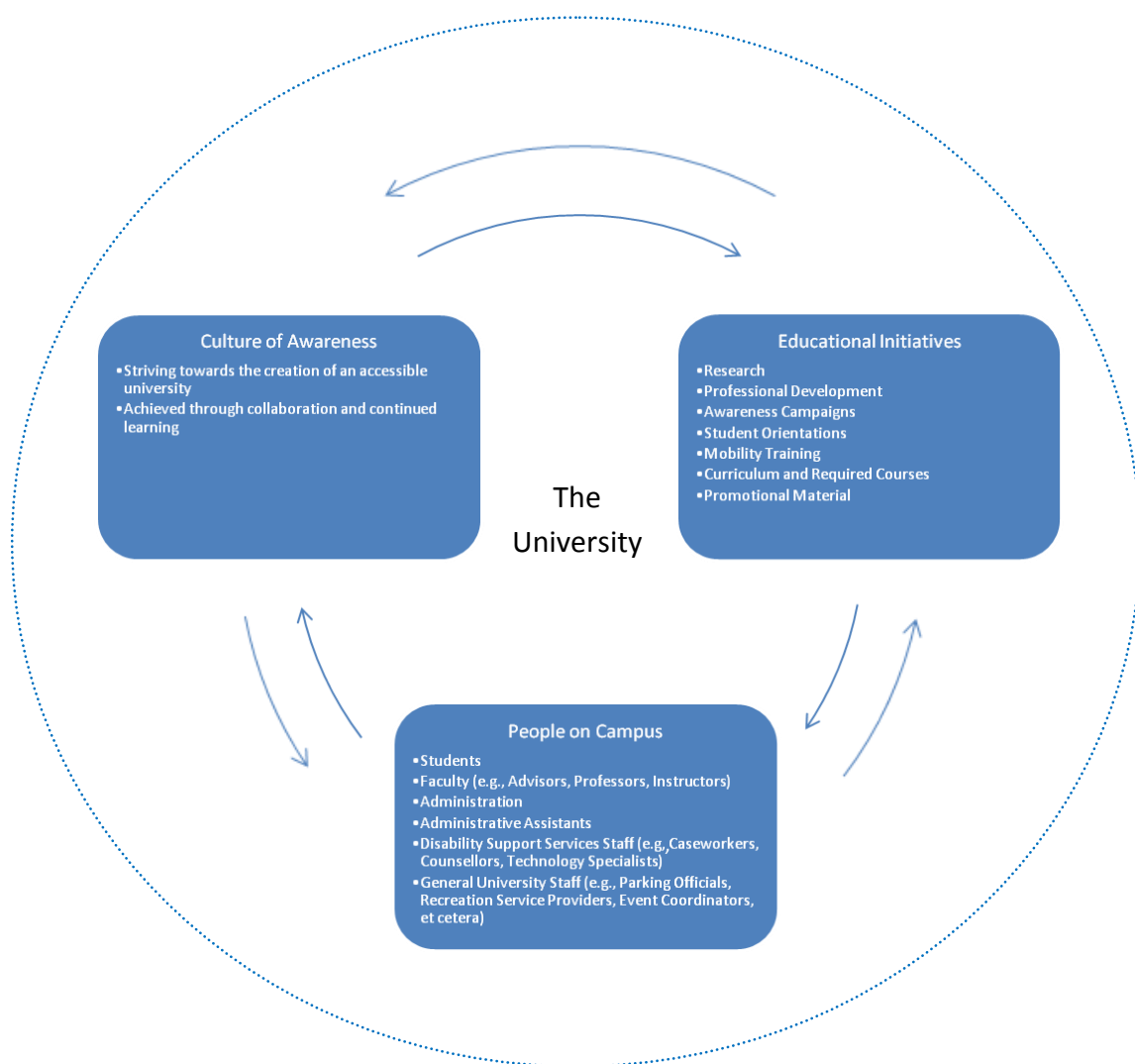


Figure 1. Promoting accessibility through the Trickle-down Effect Model

the Trickle-down Effect Model are bounded by a permeable membrane to acknowledge that this system does not exist in a vacuum; other spheres of influence (e.g., the social culture at large) can influence and be influenced by the Trickle-down Effect Model that is embedded within the university setting.

For example, moving in a counter-clockwise fashion, people on campus may shape education through the production of research that can then be used to generate knowledge and raise awareness on campus. Subsequently, once knowledge has been raised, this information can be used to create a disability-friendly culture of awareness on campus that can, in turn, influence more people on campus to act as allies and to embrace practices that enhance accessibility for students with disabilities at university. As a result, a culture of awareness may make people on campus more receptive to education about accessibility.

The same idea also holds when one moves through the model in a clockwise fashion. For example, if individuals reflect on the ways in which the culture of awareness may or may not manifest within the university, some of these people may subsequently decide to establish educational initiatives that can, in turn, foster greater awareness for other members in the campus community. Therefore, regardless of the direction one takes, the Trickle-down Effect Model operates as a continuous loop that can filter out more (and more) inaccessible barriers—including but not limited to beliefs, practices, policies, structures, and physical environments—over time as one cycles through the system again (and again).

To illustrate the model, consider the following example inspired by an issue identified in this study. Note that both cycles appear to move in a counter-clockwise

fashion. *The barrier—A lack of accessible “accessible” parking:* Two disabled students with physical disabilities made their way to campus together. After arriving to campus, they were unable to find (accessible) parking designated for students (with disabilities) near the building where their class was held. Given that both students needed to park as close to the building as possible, they decided to park in an empty lot that was located right beside the building they needed to access. Although they noticed that the lot said it was reserved for professors, the students decided to park there anyways because there was no alternative—there were no empty spaces or accessible parking spots located nearby. Parking spots closest to some of the buildings were provided, but they were metered and the students could not “run” back and forth to fill the meters. Besides, they had permits indicating that they were disabled and had already paid for a parking pass. And it was Sunday, the lot was empty!

Reflecting on this barrier, consider how the Trickle-down Effect Model demonstrates how accessibility can be shaped at university. *Cycle One:* After one of the students shared information with [her/his] professor about the barrier of the inaccessible “accessible” parking on campus that [s]he and the fellow student had experienced (e.g., *people on campus*), the student consequently raised awareness by drawing attention to the issue of inaccessibility through this conversation (e.g., *educational initiatives*). This educational conversation reaffirmed the professor’s cultural understanding that access was an important—but sometimes overlooked—characteristic of the university environment (e.g., *culture of awareness*) and [s]he subsequently reflected on how the culture of awareness had influenced disabled individuals on campus (e.g., *people on campus*).

Cycle Two: After reflecting on the parking-related barriers [her/his] students had faced on campus, the professor met with Parking Services to contest the fine that had been issued to [her/his] students (e.g., *people on campus*). As [s]he advocated on behalf of [her/his] students, the professor identified how a lack of actually accessible parking was problematic for some people with disabilities on campus (e.g., *educational initiatives*). Parking close to a building in many cases is a privilege, but it is essential to certain individuals with disabilities to ensure that certain environments remain accessible. Furthermore, [s]he challenged the policy and argued that it was inequitable to have issued tickets to those who had parked in spots closest to the buildings with an accessible parking permit and a university-issued parking pass for students displayed on their dash—regardless of whether or not the parking policy classified the zone as being preferential parking reserved for professors (e.g., *educational initiatives*). Through these educational conversations, the professor was able to raise awareness about issues of inaccessible “accessible” parking and the additional layer of challenges that the parking policies can create (e.g., *culture of awareness*). Therefore, through this educational conversation, the professor raised awareness that could, in turn, be used to promote a more accessible and disability-friendly culture on campus (e.g., *culture of awareness*). Once the dialogue around inaccessible “accessible” parking informs cultural awareness, it can inform the practices of other people on campus so that parking can become progressively more accessible.

A clockwise cycle was also identified in the literature. For example, Titchkosky’s (2011) engaged in critical reflective practices to develop conceptual awareness about how access is experienced at university and how these issues can shape meaning (e.g., *culture*

of awareness). Through her approach to questioning access, she has developed a knowledge base about and an approach to examining (issues of) access that are not often thought about. Sharing these insights in the form of a book (see Titchkosky, 2011), in turn, enables the university community to use these teachings as an educational text to foster awareness and stimulate educational discussions in class (e.g., *educational initiatives*). Within these classrooms, students and professors who reflect on the implications of her findings can become aware of how inaccessibility can be shaped by people and environments. Subsequently, these individuals can then apply what they have learned in their daily lives by acting as allies and advocates who can enhance access (e.g., *people on campus*). As a result, Titchkosky (2011) identified that “people are starting to wonder about access; how it is rejected; how it is blocked; and how it is represented, as well as by whom. This wondering is making a difference to how the idea of access is accessed” (p. 10). Therefore, as more people start to question access, the Trickle-down Effect Model can continue to be applied to advance and enhance accessibility within university.

If (and when) the cycle stalls due to the manifestation of new barriers, these momentary breakdowns represent new opportunities for other stakeholders to collaborate, identify issues of inaccessibility, and engage in education to raise awareness and enhance accessibility. For example, if a professor fails to recognize how her pedagogical practices may limit the participation of certain individuals in her class, students or researchers can use this as an opportunity to address the issues of inaccessibility and to foster the recognition and use of more inclusive practices.

This model builds on the practice of critical awareness that Disability Studies scholars note can encourage people to challenge normative structures that constitute barriers for the disabled (see Gabel, 2005; Michalko, 2008; Titchkosky, 2009, 2011; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). However, it is important to recognize that “disability is not merely something to be educated about” (Michalko, 2008, p. 414) because this approach “contribut[es] to the solution to the trouble of disability” (p. 414). Therefore, this appears to reaffirm the participants’ assertions that the creation of an accessible university is contingent on a shared cultural feeling across the campus community that is welcoming to disabled students. These cultural implications extend beyond graduate students and can positively shape the university community as a whole.

Furthermore, I hope that the practical nature of the Trickle-down Effect Model can address the limitations that have been attributed to the implementation of accessibility policy and planning at university; for example, the notion that that “disability policy end[s] up planning to do rather than doing, so that planning for inclusion becomes the doing” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 100). In addition, the model also embraces the notion that accessibility, like “inclusion . . . involve[s] the perennial task of identifying, challenging, and ultimately removing all the complex, varied barriers to inclusive participation” (Barton, 2008, p. xviii).

Future Recommendations

Certain academics and student researchers have led the charge in developing scholarship related to disabled graduate student in the United Kingdom (see Farrar, 2006; Jacklin, 2011), United States (see Gabel & Miskovic, 2014; Ganschow et al., 1999; Kim & Williams, 2012; Lash, 2013; Miskovic & Gabel, 2012; Nocella 2005; Olkin, 2002a,

2002b, 2010; Park et al., 1987; Rainwater-Lawler & Yumori, 2010; Sierra-Zarella, 2005; West et al., 1993), and Canada (see Duffett & Latour, 2015; Erten, 2011; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Grundy et al., 2003, 2005; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Myers et al., 2014; NEADS, 2014; Roberts et al., n.d.; Rose, 2010). However, as previously discussed, research related to disabled graduate students remains to be developed (Duffett & Latour, 2015; Grundy & McGinn, 2008; Jacklin, 2011; NEADS, 2014)—particularly in Canada (Duffett & Latour, 2015; NEADS, 2014).

Although additional results of the comprehensive, multi-institutional, pan-Canadian research project conducted by NEADS (2014) are anticipated to be released during the Fall or Winter of 2015 (Duffett & Latour, 2015), future qualitative studies can serve to enrich the literature base by providing detailed accounts of the experiences of disabled graduate students. Furthermore, while a handful of single-site Canadian studies have been conducted with disabled graduate students in collaboration with faculty (Grundy & McGinn, 2008;), in collaboration with faculty and student colleagues (Grundy et al., 2003, 2005; Myers et al., 2014), or in relation to the collective community of disabled students including those at both the undergraduate as well as the graduate level of study (see Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012), stakeholders from other institutions should consider conducting similar research focusing exclusively on disabled master's and doctoral students to assess the climate and culture of (in)accessibility at their respective institutions. The importance of conducting institutional studies in Ontario is of particular importance given the advancements in disability legislation, such as *AODA* (2005). Nevertheless, filling these research gaps throughout Canada and beyond will serve to prevent the views of disabled graduate students from being overshadowed

by the literature related to students with disabilities at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, it would be beneficial if this research could be conducted by or in collaboration with disabled researchers, either students or faculty, to foster the professional growth of disabled scholars and their contributions to the research community.

Given that *AODA* accessibility training sessions were found to be problematic for some in terms of content delivery and others in terms of how information was received by staff, future research could focus on the best practices for how *AODA* training sessions can be used to foster understanding of accessibility needs and to contribute to a the development of a welcoming culture on campus. How might training sessions be run so that the contents can be embraced by nondisabled individuals in meaningful ways rather than acquire information simply out of a sense of obligation? Pilot studies could also be developed to see how educational initiatives might be able to foster greater awareness of accessibility needs of disabled (graduate) students on campus, and these projects could target staff, faculty, and fellow students.

In addition, given that students expressed a need for professional development of disability service providers, further research appears necessary in this area. As Rose (2010) and Roberts et al. (n.d.) noted, in order to provide clarification on the accommodations in the graduate environment, academic departments first must clearly articulate what they consider to be essential requirements within their programs. Following this, research should focus on how disability support services representatives can better address the needs of disabled students at the graduate level. Do accommodation needs shift as disabled students transition into graduate studies; if so,

how? What accommodation needs might master's and doctoral students have and how might the university community support these accommodation needs?

Future research could look to the cultural implications that departments can have on the institutional culture with respect to disability. For example, what role do certain academic disciplines play in increasing awareness about disability and accessibility on campus? Certain academic disciplines have well-developed knowledge and insight into disability as a social construction, that could be shared to increased awareness of social conditions that facilitate and inhibit (in)accessibility. Fields that embrace aspects of the social model understandings of disability may play a particular role in cultivating campus climates that are more conducive to fostering cultures of acceptance and understanding, which may in turn improve accessibility.

Conclusions

The results of this generic qualitative study reveal that the experience of (in)accessibility at university, according to the perspectives of three graduate students who self-identify as disabled or as having a disability(s), is linked to (a) the places on campus, (b) the people on campus, and (c) the culture of awareness. Overall, places on campus were typically found to be inaccessible. The participants identified that there were several components of the physical campus that contributed to inaccessibility. Experiences with people on campus, however, were more varied and stakeholders—such as faculty, disability support services staff, and administration—could enhance as well as constrain the experience of accessibility. Although I interviewed graduate students, many of the experiences participants described could be used to foster inclusive and accessible practices for all students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. For example,

participants claimed that proactive universal design strategies can benefit a wide range of people at university. Furthermore, proactive leadership also appeared to be essential with respect to ensuring that the places, events, policies, and instruction on campus were accessible. However, there are also unique needs of disabled graduate students that have to be specifically addressed. Similar to the literature, there remains a need to correct the assumption that graduate students with disabilities do not exist on campus and to ensure that disability support services staff are better prepared to facilitate accommodations for graduate students.

Similar to the literature, the experience of inaccessibility was typically the unintended consequence that resulted from an overarching lack of awareness. Consequently, participants recommended that a variety of educational initiatives should be adopted on campus in order to foster a culture of awareness. However, the receptiveness of people on campus to awareness raising initiatives was found to be contingent on the existence of a disability-friendly culture. As a result, people on campus, educational initiatives, and the culture of awareness appear to be interdependent. Based on these findings, I developed the multidirectional Trickle-down Effect Model to illustrate how experiences of accessibility at university can be enhanced and experiences of inaccessibility can be limited. These findings appear to be particularly important given that the literature has identified that the number of disabled students entering graduate school is increasing while awareness about graduate students with disabilities remains limited. In addition, the legal context within the province of Ontario has made it mandatory for public institutions—such as universities—to adopt proactive measures to ensure that they are accessible to disabled individuals. Therefore, it remains important for

other universities, both within and outside the province, to consider how the accessibility needs of graduate students are being met. As Barton (2008) notes, inclusion—or in this case, accessibility—requires the “perennial significance of a critical, questioning approach to inclusive thinking, disability issues, and research and practice” (p. xvii).

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Initial Interview Guide

Background Questions

Undergraduate Studies

- I'd like to begin by asking you some brief background questions. These questions are quick short answer questions to learn more about who you are as a student.
- 1. What did you complete your undergrad degree(s) in?
- 2. Was this undergrad program(s) a 3 years, 4 years, 5 year in length?
- 3. Were you able to graduate within the recommended time requirements of the degree?
 - a. If not, how much additional time did you require?
- 4. Did you study as a full-time or part-time undergrad student?
- 5. Were you awarded any funding to complete your undergrad?
- 6. Not including this undergrad degree, have you ever studied at the undergraduate level before?
 - a. If yes, did you satisfy the requirements of the program (and graduate from the program)?
- * Repeat questions 1-5 if other undergrad degrees have been completed.

Graduate Studies

- 7. What graduate program are you currently enrolled in?
- 8. Is this program course-based or research-based?
- 9. Are you a full-time or part-time grad student?
- 10. Have you been awarded any funding to complete your graduate work?
- 11. When did you enter into the program (year)?
- 12. What is your anticipated time to completion?
- 13. Do you anticipate needing additional time to complete your degree?
- 14. Not including your current program, have you ever studied at the graduate level before?
 - a. If yes, did you satisfy the requirements of the program (and graduate from the program)?
- * Repeat questions 7-13 if other graduate degrees have been completed.

Services and Accommodations

1. Did you receive any services or accommodations during elementary school?
 - a. If yes, what services or accommodations did you receive?
2. Did you receive any services or accommodations during high school?
 - a. If yes, what services or accommodations did you receive?
3. Did you receive any services or accommodations during your undergrad?
 - a. If yes, what services or accommodations did you receive?
4. Did/do you receive any services or accommodations during grad school?
 - a. If yes, what services or accommodations did you receive?
5. Has your disability(s) been officially diagnosed by a professional?
 - a. If so, when?

Questions about the Participant's Experiences

- Now, if it's okay with you, I'd like to ask some more open-ended questions. Whenever you feel it's appropriate, please feel free to share stories or examples that help convey your experiences.

Disability

- I'd like to begin by talking specifically about disability. For example, I have a disability that ... (briefly explain nature of my disability).
1. In your own words, can you briefly explain to me what your disability is?

Accessibility

1. What does the term, accessibility, mean to you in a university setting?
2. Based on your experiences while studying at university, what factors may have enabled access for you as a disabled student (with a disability)? Can you provide any examples based on your experiences? (Was there anything you found to be particularly supportive or accommodating?)
3. Based on your experiences while studying at university, what factors may have limited access for you as a disabled student (with a disability)? Can you provide any examples based on your experiences? (Was there anything you found to be particularly obstructive, unsupportive or unaccommodating?)

4. Have your experiences with access been shaped by ____ (blank) ____? If so, how and are there any moments that stand out in particular?
- The physical structure
 - Professors
 - Administrative Staff
 - Students/Peers
 - Policies
 - Services
 - You, personally
 - Has anything else affected your experience with accessibility? If so, can you explain what this was and how it shaped your experience with accessibility?

Learning from Disability—Recommendations for Change

- Based on your experiences, what key insight or advice would you give the university to enhance the experience of access for disabled students (with disabilities)?
- Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer incoming disabled students (with disabilities) to enhance their experience with access at university?

Final Thoughts

- Well those are all of my questions for now.
- Is there anything you would like to say or add to our conversation?

Sample Probing Questions

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you have an example of that?
- Are there any moments that you can think of that stand out in particular?
- How did you come to know that?
- What experiences lead you to believe that?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Follow-up Interview Guide

General Member Check Questions:

1. Were you able to review the transcript I sent you?
2. Did you feel you were accurately represented in the transcript?
3. Is there anything you would like to add to the transcript?
4. Is there anything you would like to change or remove from the transcript?

Clarification Questions:

Note: This section has been purposely omitted from this appendix in order to maintain confidentiality because some of the clarification questions contained specific and potentially identifying information.